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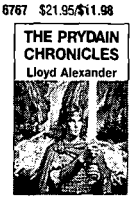

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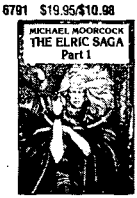

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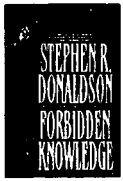

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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION® MAGAZINE

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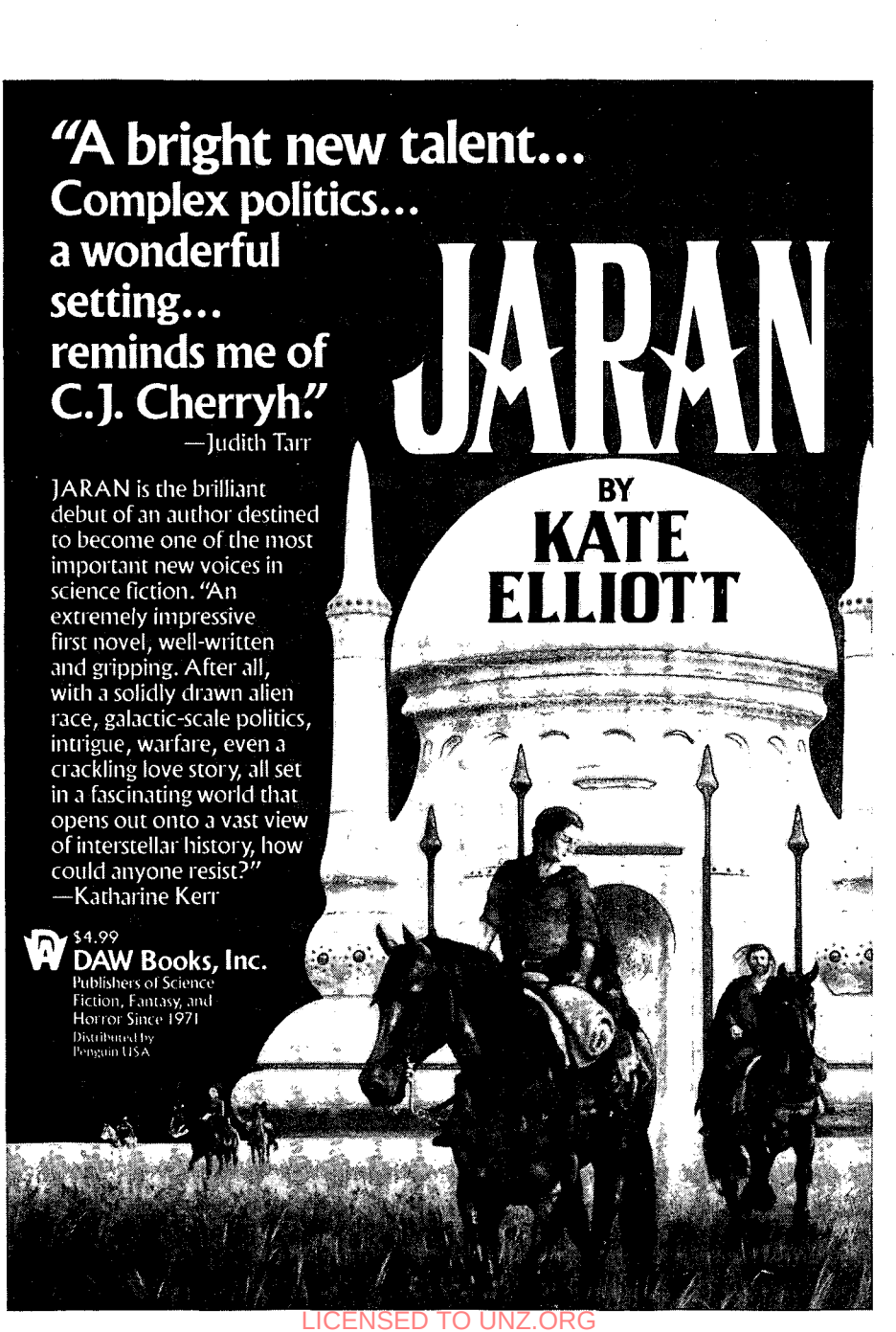

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EDITORIAL

COMING HOME

by Isaac Asimov

Until a few years ago I had a long, happy lifetime of relatively good health, during which I was able to do the one thing I'm good at and the one thing I enjoy more than anything else—writing.

Then things began to go wrong. For instance, time passed, and I found myself a senior citizen. I'm not sure how this happened, but it seems to be a universal phenomenon, so I don't feel very lonely in my new position in life. Furthermore, my body began to behave as if it were admitting to senior citizenship long before I was ready. Maybe nobody's ever quite ready, but here I am—senior, gray-haired, creaky, full of the wisdom of age, with all the physiological scars to prove it.

Recently I arrived at the age of human plumbing problems. It's true that mine held off for considerably more years than those of my father or brother, but nevertheless, they hit hard. I finally had conventional urological surgery but turned out to be one of those patients with unconventional recoveries. I spent a total of two months in the hospital including Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, and —sob—my seventy-second birthday (my dear wife brought in my favorite meal, Peking Duck. I was prepared to fight off the admonitions of noble but tyrannical doctors and nurses, but nobody objected).

The worst part was when I was discharged for the second time, arrived home on a weekend, and instantly began to bleed profusely. There was nothing to do but return to the hospital. It was not something I wanted to do but I was given no choice because Janet dragged me into my clothes and said I had to go.

The next problem was to get me into a taxi, but fortunately I have a wonderful neighbor who took over and practically carried me down the hall, into the elevator, and then into a taxi.

Janet went in the taxi with me and held my head. I remember virtually nothing about that ride except that I thought I was dying and that I felt good about it. Life had grown so bitter and empty that I felt it wasn't worth living.

Janet then got me into a private room in the hospital, where I was placed in bed. The next day, Mon-

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day, Janet arrived with my mail, which she tried to read to me. I didn't want to hear it but I was too weak to argue about it.

As the days went on and I improved, I still grumbled about Janet bringing me the mail, now increasing because more people knew I was sick. Janet lectured me, pointing out that the letters had been written out of love and concern, and that the least I could do was to read them.

I was wrong to grumble, although I did so because I felt so ill that I wanted to do the equivalent of crawling wounded into a cave, alone, to die. I received a large number of very kindly letters. I didn't deserve all the love that was poured out on me, but I accepted it just the same.

I lay on my hospital bed, depressed because I knew I'd never be a galloping full-time writer again. I was glad that Bob Silverberg's done a wonderful job novelizing some of my short stories. I was grateful to Martin J. Greenberg, good friend and competent, hard-working collaborator on anthologies. I thought about how well Sheila Williams and Gardner Dozois manage this magazine, and how good they are to me. I'm proud that my name's on this magazine and I felt happier knowing that if I'm able to I'll contribute anything I can to it.

I continued to improve physically. They weren't going to let me out of the hospital until the bleed-

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ing stopped, nor would they let me out until I had learned to urinate again. Eventually I managed both, and could see my way clear to leaving the hospital. I left, very unsteady on my legs. They have improved and I can now sit down and get up from any chair. I can walk around almost normally. I can even write a short editorial such as the one you are reading.

I feel guilty about not answering the many letters sent me. The whole experience has made me think more about letters as a unique form of literature. They communicate directly from one person to another, often revealing thoughts and feelings that are sometimes hard to say out loud. In this age of phone conversations, letter-writing has diminished, but my colleagues and fans are literate. Even the messages they wrote on get-well cards were literate, amusing, and helpful.

There remains only my thanks to all you kindly people who wrote me when you and I both thought I was dying. ●

Isaac Asimov died of heart and kidney failure on April 6, 1992. His wife, Janet, and his daughter, Robyn, were at his side. We will proudly continue his legacy at *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, but we will miss him deeply. A memorial by friends and colleagues will be published in an upcoming issue.

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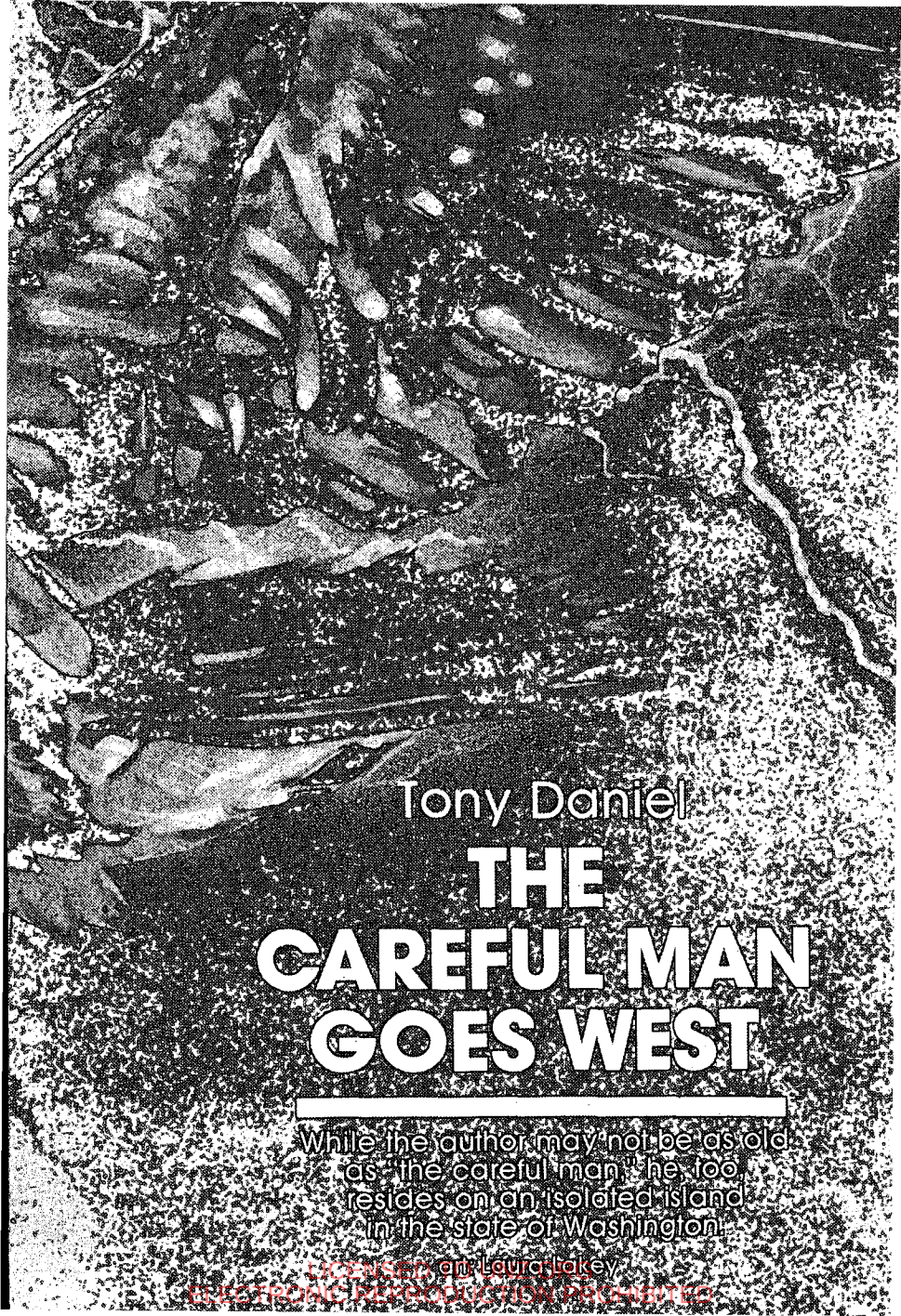

Tony Daniel

THE CAREFUL MAN GOES WEST

While the author may not be as old as "the careful man," he, too, resides on an isolated island in the state of Washington.

LICENSED art Laura Lakey
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I figured it was going to be another uneventful day, just the way I liked them. Cassie was interviewing this woman who did collages of seashore debris, and then had to go get a picture of the Quilters For Peace, who were basting their big raffle comforter today. Cassie, of course, could not drive. That's where I came in. Oh, I didn't mind, and it gave me something to do with my Saturdays. Otherwise, I'd spend the day opening little Wounds and watching the baby horrors squeeze through.

The opening of Wounds is like a nervous tic or knowing how to do a dexterity trick with your body—rolling a quarter over your fist, say—you fall into it when you're not thinking, or thinking about something else, and, before you know it, you've wasted hours and accomplished nothing, not even your own amusement. Nevertheless, after so many years of doing it, I couldn't stop. Cassie, however, was not very impressed with my little phantasms, which was probably why I liked her so much. She said I was wasting myself here on the island, and that I ought to take my act on the road, or do charity benefits for the good of mankind or something. Whatever she *said,* I suspected what Cassie most liked about me was my taciturn nature and the relative peace, for the most part, with which I'd faced life's problems and surprises for as long as she'd known me.

I had, lately, felt twinges of dissatisfaction with my chosen way of living and with the general melancholy into which I'd descended these last couple of decades. What was hardest to take was consciously *not* doing *anything* even the slightest bit world-shaking. Inaction, whether or not it is for the greater good, can get on a man's nerves after a while. I knew, however, that these twinges were false omens, to be ignored. I'd *had* a different sort of life; I *knew* what I was missing, and what I now possessed. Love—plain old love between a man and woman—was about the only thing I'd ever experienced that was valuable and didn't inevitably hurt someone in the process of its fulfillment. Being a Splicer had only brought me sorrow, but I'd found love with Cassie McCullough. She made me happy, and living on the island was all the peace I'd known in years.

The debris-collage woman Cassie had to interview lived in a huge brown house overlooking the harbor. It was all boxy and contemporary—contemporary with the 1970s, that is. At the time, I imagined the place was full of exotic bric-a-brac from the woman's life, a living collage. Valuable stuff, I figured. Crystal from the hotel in Belgium. Intricate bamboo devices from Borneo which had no apparent function. Nandu feathers from Argentina. I don't know, lots of things like that, tastefully arranged not in compartmentalized rooms, but in subtle strings and

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clumps throughout the house, following a personal logic. Human patterns. At least, that's the way I wanted it to be. I never did go in.

When I pulled up in my Jeep to drop Cassie off, the collage woman was standing out in her driveway. She was kind of dark and kind of old, and bangled like a gypsy. Neadra Bigmoon, or somesuch. Her head was oblate, the top flattened the slightest bit. I could have guessed she was Chinook, but at that moment I would have bet a wigwam full of wampum that she didn't have a drop of Amerind in her. This was Vashon Island, after all, where every third woman—pale blonde or not—believed that she was descended from an Indian priestess, and, in fact, that she was in touch with her illustrious ancestor through arcane channels. Who knew? Maybe there was a Society of Head-Flatteners on the island, of which Neadra Bigmoon was an officer in good standing. Besides, Chinooks hadn't flattened their infants' heads for a hundred years or more, and even *then* . . . hadn't it only been the ones east of the Dalles on the Columbia? I found it hard to recall after so long.

Neandra gave me a very intense looking-over. I didn't think anything of it at the time. Some people—particularly older ladies (even *bohemian* older ladies, who you'd think wouldn't be)—were put off by my appearance. I hadn't cut my hair in years, and wore a pony tail down my back. As she accompanied Cassie into her house, she glanced back at me and gave me another examination. I must have finally passed muster, because she took Cassie's arm in a friendly way, and led her through the door. I headed directly for the Island Tavern, to suck on a beer and wait for Cassie to call me after she'd done the interview.

The tavern was always ropey as hell; it reeked of flower power and fermenting hippies. Tanya, who owned the place now, had worked the bar, she'd once told me, ever since she ran away from her home in Dayton and migrated west on a spiritual journey which honored and paralleled the yearly wanderings of the extinct buffalo. She ended up here in the Puget Sound, which is a lot farther west than the buffalo got, I knew for a fact. But I was glad she was inconsistent enough to wind up here, and stay. The tavern was a good place, mellow and peaceful. So was Tanya. She'd make a good Splicer, I'd thought more than once over the years I'd known her, though I prayed that nothing traumatic enough to make her into a Splicer would ever befall her.

The tavern was a piece of the past somehow woven from the fibers of the present, as a knot can exist within a length of rope, separate from the rope, yet formed from the rope's turnings. Almost as if a piece of the sixties had been Spliced into the now. Although the tavern *felt* like the sixties, it kept Tanya mildly prosperous in the good old present day. I happened to know that she was doing well enough to support both of the parents she'd so appalled those many years ago.

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The island was a haven for all manner of people who, for one reason or another, didn't fit in anywhere else in the West, rural or urban. People too weird for California came *here*. Most of us were harmless. I counted on this, and on the isolation—no bridges; you could only get to Vashon by ferry—to keep out the undesirables. Undesirable to *me,* that is. As in: after my scalp. Unfortunately, physically living in an isolated place—the island—also had its side effects, which I understood, but could really do little about. For instance, falling in love with Cassie was silly and even dangerous. What could I possibly give her? My race was run, and if I hadn't lost, I hadn't exactly acquitted myself very nobly, either. And trouble would be coming my way, sooner or later. That was pretty certain. But love felt wonderful. There was a freedom, a lack of direction, in my life, which was completely pleasant and unexpected at this late date.

This is not too bad, I thought, as I settled down into my customary seat at the bar and ordered a beer. To drink slowly and be an hour away from meeting with my lover. A kind of wistful warmness permeated my entire body. Today was going well. No pain, just winter sunshine and Cassie-fantasies.

Just to my left on the bar was a fine carving, cut directly into the bar's wooden surface—now chipped and cigarette-scarred—of an Indian maiden raising her hands upward in radiant praise—maybe to her returning lover, victorious in war; maybe to the great sun god himself. The object of her adoration was not in the carving. Tanya gave me a half-smile along with the beer, and brushed my hand.

"There be anything else, Henry?" she asked me. Tanya was pretty the way an antique is—waxed to a deep shine, finely cracked.

"Not at the moment," I said. "I'm waiting for Cassie to call me so I can go and pick her up."

"That girl ought to learn to drive," Tanya said. She found a spot to wipe near me and went to work on it with a bar cloth.

"I don't know," I said. "She's old-fashioned. I like her that way."

"There's old-fashioned, and then there's *inept,*" Tanya murmured under her breath. "She's from the city, of course . . ." But Tanya knew this was not a very promising avenue to pursue with me, so she asked me to do some magic for her.

She'd pissed me off in a minor way by getting down on Cassie, so at first I acted like I didn't know what she was talking about.

"You know *exactly* what I mean," she said. "Those ugly things you make out of smoke and stuff."

Well, I supposed I could, I told her. I looked around for some inspiration. My beer was sitting on one—the Indian girl. Something familiar there, I thought. I wrapped my hand around the glass and began to

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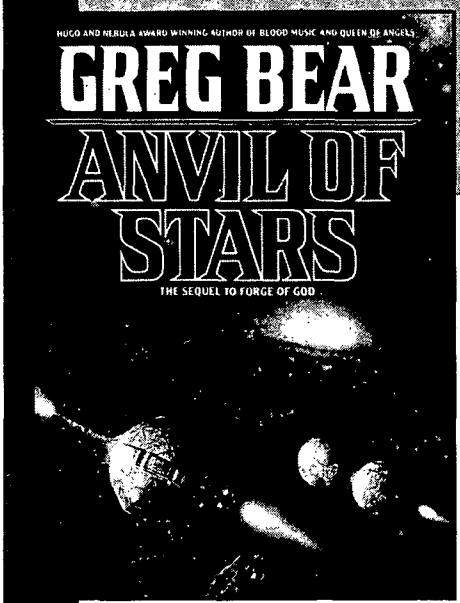
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slide it over the carving, spreading the moisture from the glass over the maiden in a thin, shining sheet. A few possibilities shuffled under the glass until I found the one I wanted. No natural Wound available, so I mentally outlined one, using the seeping line between the sheet of beer sweat on the bar and its dry edges as the guide for slicing. After I had the Wound completely visualized, with a quick motion of my hand I overturned the beer. I cut open the Wound.

The amber liquid flowed over the carving, penetrated the hewn interstices, then rolled on down the bar. But as it passed the carving—as it passed across the open Wound I'd formed—the beer *stuck* to something, some other reality from inside the Wound. The beer took on shape and texture. With a sort of gelling motion, the Indian maiden's face apeared in rainbow colors upon the liquid surface of the beer. With a mental flourish, I sealed the Splice. The face flowed with the beer; it *was* the beer, transformed by its Wound passage, a little island of weirdness in the world, floating like a detached scab. Tanya exclaimed happily, and watched as the Indian maiden traveled the length of the bar. The maiden's face changed as she went, as if she were a motion picture. First she lost the look of abject worship. Her lips thinned out to reflect laughter, then weary cynicism. As she reached the edge of the bar and drizzled over the side, she was crying, her mouth worked into an expression of the utmost loss and terror. Then she was gone, over the edge, onto the floor.

Tanya watched the performance with only one intake of breath—when the Indian maiden's irony turned to horror.

Yes, there had *been that Sioux woman, Respects-the-Sun, with whom I'd spent a winter. Some damned cavalryman had killed her in a raid on her people's spring camp.* Too many memories half-buried. But that was the way of the Wounds. Always a horror or a wonder from the past, *my* past. And my past was the principal reason that, for most intents and purposes, I'd given up Splicing.

"Well, you conjured up a good mess," Tanya said, after the vision had run its course. I could tell she'd been shaken by it, though I imagined she'd seen things more peculiar inside her own head back in the sixties. She took a moment to regain her composure. "You have a lot of hurt in there somewhere, Henry White," she finally said. "You sure hide it well most of the time."

"Life and death in a beer," I said, "Nine parts death." I slid my empty glass forward for a refill.

"You should think about letting it go . . . the hurt, I mean," said Tanya. "I felt so much better when I released mine. It made me into a new person."

Let it go, I thought, sure. Nothing has ever happened to *you* like what

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happened to *me,* Tanya. I'm pretty sure of that. And the matter's not so simple; memory is a delicate symbiosis of pain and wonder. To let go of one is like cutting a strand on a spiderweb: the whole thing collapses on itself. To have *died,* Respects-the-Sun had to have *lived. We* lived, happy for a time together, she and I. So long ago. Cassie and she were a lot alike. Defiant and tender-hearted women.

Cassie called when I was halfway through the next beer, and said that she was finished with the collage woman. The winds were whipping up pretty good as I drove my Jeep alongside the harbor; it was getting on toward late January, and Vashon Island was known for the strength of its winter blows. Cassie was waiting in the driveway when I got there, with Neadra standing next to her. Once again, Neadra scrutinized me as Cassie climbed in. Cassie waved as we drove down the driveway, but Neadra just watched us, emotionlessly. It was a strange sight, her staring stonily at me in the rearview mirror until I rounded a bend and she was gone.

"How'd it go?" I asked, after we'd gotten to the road.

Cassie thought a while before she answered. "She's nice, I guess. A really good artist. Her stuff is really . . . energetic. Kind of angry, even."

"Did you get some pictures?"

"Some. She kind of rushed me with them."

"I thought you didn't let people do that to you."

"She was pretty insistent. But I got what I wanted."

"That's my Cassie," I said.

"Yeah." Cassie looked out the window, pensive. We'd grown into an easy way between us, having long whittled down the "what are you thinking?" question to just plain "what?" and finally to a certain touch on the arm. I touched her that way.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "Nothing, I guess. Neadra asked about you. She was wondering why I didn't drive myself out to her place."

"Did you tell her that you were a former big city reporter and didn't go in for yokel ways like learning to drive?" I asked. This drew a brief, wan smile from Cassie.

"Yes. But she didn't really seem to care. She asked me how long I'd known you. She even asked me what you were like."

I was so busy trying to read Cassie's emotions as we drove down the road that I almost ran over a railroad flare someone had placed in the center of the road. Rounding the bend, we saw what the warning was for. The wind had taken a branch from one of the pine trees that hung over the power lines and flung it so that it spanned the two wires on either side of the pole. Positive and negative connected, and the branch was sparking and burning at either point where it was touching the

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wires. Out of habit, I noticed that the branch formed the inflamed upper edge of a perfect Wound.

A firefighter stopped us, while cars from the opposite direction passed by in our lane. They were wisely confining us all to the lane farthest from the burning branch. A smoke that smelled of ozone and evergreen filled the air.

"I need to get a picture of this," said Cassie, and before I could stop her, she'd hopped out of the Jeep. I mimed the old exasperated male act for the flagman, then found a place to pull the Jeep off the road. The firechief was there, and he knew Cassie. He started explaining the situation to her as soon as she'd walked over to him. I got out of the Jeep and leaned against the hood, watching the action—or lack thereof.

Cassie, as usual, was in charge of the situation within thirty seconds. Although she was demure, even insecure, in her personal life (I'd first been attracted by her coy looks and shy semi-flirtations), in her professional capacity, she was a tiger of a lady. Once she'd unexpectedly walked in on an unadvertised meeting the Vashon Sewer Board had called to ramrod a bond issue through before opposition could organize. Cassie had nearly brained Commissioner Waynewright with a large-print copy of the Constitution she'd brought with her to make a point about unannounced meetings of elected officials. I wished she'd gone ahead and let him have it, the scum-sucker. Come to think of it, the firechief had been at that meeting to deliver a report. Maybe that was why he was being so cooperative today: fear for his health.

Cassie got a few shots of the burning branch from a safe distance, then evidently decided they weren't good enough. She stepped over the ditch on the side of the road and walked up under the pole that was nearest to the suspended branch. The firechief looked like he wanted to protest, but she shot him one of those "Don't Make The Goddess of the First Amendment Angry" looks, and he stayed silent. She snapped a good six or seven photos, and angled closer under the branch, looking for something more dramatic. Even *I* was starting to get antsy now. Get out from *under* there, I thought at her. Come *on,* babe, that's enough.

I tried to resist the urge to use that Wound and to Splice; I concentrated instead on wishing her out from under that branch the old-fashioned way. The wind picked up again, not very strongly. But it was enough to shift the branch on the lines. With new contact points, the flashing and sparking started all over again. Cassie squeezed off a bunch of shots. The electrical fire must have been pretty intense because, after a minute or so, the wires melted apart. The longer strands draped downward toward Cassie.

She had good reflexes, thank God, and scuttled over toward the other nearby pole. The ends of the severed wires missed her by a good two feet,

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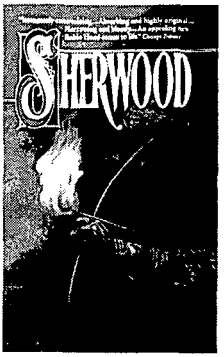

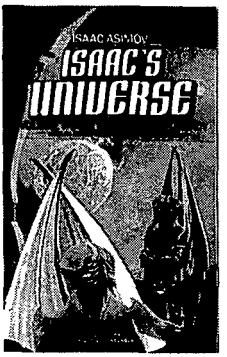

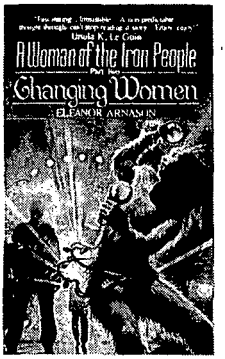

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and hit the ground several yards away. The other side of the severed lines were not long enough to reach the ground. They swung down past the pole Cassie was standing under, and one of them wrapped around the pole's supporting guywire. The other rested against the pole, touching the thin metal strip which ran down its length. Both of these contacts set off another round of brilliant fireworks.

"Cassie, don't move!" called the firechief. "Don't touch the pole, for godsake, that groundwire's hot!"

Cassie nodded that she understood. She turned around and took a shot of the flaming guywire. Only after she'd gotten that did she cry out, "What should I do?" She seemed scared, but ready to respond to directions. Her line of retreat on one side was blocked by the downed wire hanging from the other pole. She could not run in the direction of the guywire, which had charged the ground for yards around the area where it connected to its stake. And if she ran in the opposite direction and the guywire burned through, the pole would fall on top of her. For the moment, she was trapped in place. She inched around to the side of the pole away from the crackling guywire.

"Stay put," said the chief. "The line will shut down in seven seconds, then switch on and off every few seconds after that. We'll have to manually cut power completely off further down the line." He directed a couple of his men to go and do that.

But the guywire was fraying and the pole was leaning. The wind had maybe weakened its supports, and without the tension of the overhead wires or the guyline, it was obviously going to topple. Topple onto the girl I loved.

There was the Wound, roughly triangular, between the pole, the guywire and the ground. I couldn't see another one nearby, and I couldn't mentally form one under such stress. I knew I'd better use it before the cable broke and the pole fell. Yet I hesitated. Wasn't this just the sort of thing I'd moved to Vashon Island to avoid? The horror which might lurk on the other side of every Wound I opened, the *not-rightness* which the joining of this reality and others inevitably produced, as surely as flint and steel shot sparks? Having good intentions was not enough, never enough. I remembered that much.

The fury of the Beast-wind, bearing down on the Millers, the farm next door. Voices of screaming fear lost in the howl of the wind's roar. Lost. Herbert Miller, Florence, six children. I was just protecting the Killbourns, choosing a world with intelligent winds. Splicing intelligence from that reality into the tornado which, without my intervention, would destroy a year's worth of grain, along with the last measure of hope left to my friends out on the harsh Dakota. Intelligence I'd thought I could reason with, control. But the Windbeast took some hate, some stubbornness from my

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past. How could the Beast have gotten away from me? How could I have made such a horrible mistake?

Never *enough*. Power has a way of creating its *own* means and purposes. But when you give up acting on good intentions, you give up being human. Did I really believe this? Did I really believe that *actions* could make a difference? So far, the only conclusion I could draw was that *not acting* was the only worthwhile thing a man could do, the only thing that didn't bring hurt and pain. But there was no way in hell I was going to sacrifice Cassie's life for this higher principle. I knew that. Damn, I thought. Here we go again! The temporary relief, the anguish, the unpredictable after-effects of Splicing bits of another world into this world.

I made a Wound as big as a Winnebago, and, as it opened, it let out a savage wind which screamed wetly and unnaturally in my mind. I could feel a presence passing through the Wound, and I Spliced it into place.

As the sparks rained down from the guywire, they encircled and defined a vague form, huge, standing over Cassie. First only its bulk was outlined, then the sparks grew more intense, unnaturally intense, and the smoke thicker. A face appeared on the thing. It was mostly mouth, opened into a maw which, while it was semi-transparent and I could see the roadway through it, also suggested cavernous depths, with stalactite, luminous teeth.

Old Half-foot. King Bear. Stuff of trapper legend. For a moment I was amused. A brief picture of a Rendezvous, the dancing, the telling of tales, wafted through my mind. *Half-foot, killer of overeager trappers. Stalker of the beavermen who dared set out lines in its domain.* I quickly shook the memory off.

When Half-foot was sufficiently formed, it let out a great roar. The roar throbbed low and terrible, as if the thing had high voltage lines for vocal chords. Its cry was not only inhuman, it was hardly an animal cry at all. Electric. Deadly.

With its huge misshapen paw, Half-foot grasped the swaying power pole and pulled it out of the ground as you might uproot a tomato stake.

I got my thoughts together and reached into the thing's mind. I felt the clammy chill which always came over me when I went inside a hybrid presence. I felt the thing's will wrap around my intelligence like a parasite vine twining about a tree's trunk. I had to let it do this at first, so that it could understand, however vaguely and out-of-context, the situation it found itself so rudely thrust into. But there was a limit as to how much of this I could allow, because then the beast would want to survive after I used it, and that was something that could not be. This small thread, unnaturally Spliced in, would have to be cut from the regular world's train of events once it had served its purpose.

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"Throw away the pole." I sliced deep into the fuzzy thoughts of Half-foot, implanting my commands thoroughly. "Away from the girl."

I felt the tendrils of its thoughts pull the meaning of "pole" and "girl" from my mind, then "away." I pressed hard with my will, repeated myself, and old Half-foot reluctantly complied with my instructions.

By throwing the power pole straight at *me*.

I reacted without thought. What else can you do when you see fifty feet of creosote-heavy lumber flying toward you with unnatural speed? No time for a carefully opened Wound, no time for a subtle magic that may or may not be the work of an intelligence, that may or may not give you away.

Once I learned how to Cut and Splice the worlds *(Always the memory of arrows and blood. Louisa falling, bleeding, falling)* the knowledge has remained lurking at the edge of my consciousness. Kind of like what the fundamentalist Christians say: Once saved, always saved. No matter what you do, where you go, you can't escape the grace of God. Or, in my case, the jaundiced light of the Cutting Room, the non-existing place where *I* could, somehow, *be*. The Cutting Room was more of a process than a place, though; it was the binding glue which fed and detoxified the integumen of the universes, the lymph in the sticky tissue that kept realities from rubbing holes through one another and rubbing us all away. I could go there, *act* there.

But I was a doctor who had seen enough of blood for one lifetime, who wanted only to keep his mind on surfaces—the smoothness of skin under his hand, the curve of a face—and forget the bones and guts and blood underneath it all. Still, his hands can set bones, excise tumors. And kill.

I opened my mind to the knowledge of the Cutting Room. I became a Wound. Not a pinprick, as had been the other Wounds I'd made today. I cut *myself*. I cut into the very knowledge and power of Cutting, making the Wound enlarge itself without check, as a sliced muscle will strip neatly away when pulled along the grain. I was the frayed end of all time and space, severed from its natural future, ready for Splicing, oozing with the caustic drip of unformed worldstuff, noumena-blood.

The power pole had no chance against me.

I chose the best, most powerful Splice; I made my own rules.

In the new universe I Spliced together from the infinite possibilities available in the Cutting Room, all the old natural laws applied. Except for one special case. Power poles were not allowed to strike a particular combination of carbon and water on a particular island in the Puget Sound. I worked in the exact proportions and location. My exact proportions. Oh, I didn't really need to know those things precisely. I became the base, the foundation of all existence. It was like taking the frayed ends of two pieces of rope and twining them together to form one long

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length. The point of their joining was exactly *me, here, now*. You may as well say that the past and the present existed for the sole purpose of making sure that pole never struck me.

What the firefighters and Cassie *saw* was the pole veering crazily away from me as if it had bounced off a force field. It careened into the firetruck and flipped it over on its side. Everyone was clear and unhurt. Then I heard the crackling roar of old Half-foot.

The bear-god was bending over, about to stroke Cassie with several thousand volts worth of lust—the beast had twisted *love* out of my mind in a moment of inattention, and willfully misunderstood the meaning of the word. Sparks sprayed from his deformed paw. Cassie's fine brown hair was cupped about her head from all the static electricity, as if it were a tulip set for the plucking.

"That is *all*," I growled. Again, I sliced through the ligaments of the universe, but this time not so drastically. I did not need to rejoin, just take out a bad section of reality. I cut Half-foot from its foundations for existence in this universe. The beast stopped its movement. It seemed to gulp, as if to say "Oh, shit!" Then it fizzled away as quickly as a sparkler dropped into the ocean.

The firefighters stared, blank-faced. Cassie stood very still, not quite collected yet. I walked over to her and, taking her hand, led her gently back toward the Jeep. About halfway across the road, she seemed to come to herself. She aimed the camera and photographed the tilted firetruck. But I put a hand on her shoulder and felt her shaking violently. That was one picture of hers that would come out blurred. With a steady pressure, I directed her the rest of the way. The firefighters barely noticed us as we passed them. They were looking at the truck, then at the place where the pole used to be, all of them turning their heads at once, as if they were synchronized puppets.

"It was really strange," said Cassie, as she sipped a beer at the tavern. "The pole *swerved* away from you, like a curveball. And that *monster*. That wasn't like any of the things you've made before, Henry."

"No," I said. "Not like the other stuff at all." These were the first words she'd gotten out of me since we came into the tavern. I was brooding on my unplanned universe-Splicing. I was *supposed* to be retired. My ability should have dissipated, run its course, along with the empowering circumstances under which it had developed. Apparently, for better or worse, the West was not yet won. I was not yet free of my burden.

I'd spent *years* avoiding the real use of my power, making sure that my phantasms were just that—explainable as illusion, suggestion, bad drugs. Making sure that I was mentally as far away from *my* memory of the first Wounding as possible. For so long, I'd tried to live as a sunk

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stone, thinking the bland thoughts of a stone, creating no ripples. Now *this*.

"Lucky thing I got a picture of the monster," Cassie said. "I sure hope the fire guys back up our story, or my dear editor is going to think it's all a big hoax and refuse to run the photo. And you turning away the pole like that. How did you *do* that?"

"Oh, no," I said. It was mostly a low moan.

"What's the matter? Aren't you proud of me?"

I realized that what I said next could not only change forever my relationship with the woman I loved, but also determine my continued residence on this island I'd made my home. I tried to put both resolution and pathos in my voice. "You can't run that photograph, Cassie. It would destroy my life."

"You *can't* be serious, Henry. This is really important, really *big*. As in: of world-wide importance."

Cassie, transplanted big city daily reporter, was not catching the hint. "Don't you realize that *I* made that thing you saw?" I said. "I'd never hear the end of it if you let the world know."

Now I had her attention; she had, apparently, shaken off a lot of her previous mental shock. Unfortunately, she was giving me that greedy journalist look. "Well, the island already knows. Those firefighters aren't going to just *forget,* Henry. Now tell me, just *how* did you do that?"

Cassie was too good a reporter to fall for the old sleight of hand and mental suggestion line this time. I saw that I was going to have to give her the truth—or as much of it as she could understand.

"We can't talk about it here," I said. "Let's finish up and go to my place." There *were* other ways to subdue the reporter in her.

I sat back and took a sip of my drink. I'd forgone my usual beer for a good stiff whisky. This might be my last time at the tavern. Tanya worked her way to us and hovered nearby for a moment, seeing the worry in my face, hearing the still-wearing-off shock in Cassie's voice. I saw that she was going to get us fresh drinks—again on the house, no doubt—and I shook my head and told her we were fine. That was the way of this island. People drew closer when they were in danger. Maybe it was because most everybody commuted to Seattle or Tacoma and they reserved their good nature and humanity for their family and friends back home. Maybe it was because the ferries provided a natural choke-point, a limit to growth, so that money was not flowing in, turning everyone green with envy. My pet theory was that it was the *light,* the wonderful Northwestern light which streamed through clouds, sparkled from the water. Sure, it rained a lot here, but the rain was just another way of defining the *light,* giving it substance and texture. I believed that

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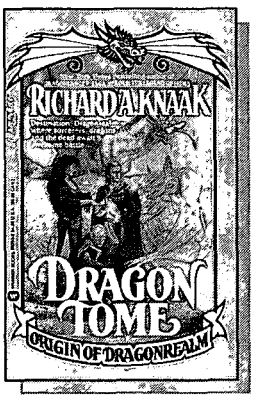

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A WORD FROM BRIAN THOMSEN

It seems like every summer around this time I wind up talking about quests, the mainstay of the epic fantasy plot (such as those featured in the novels of Richard Knaak). Yet quests also can figure prominently in other genres as well—Caine's search for his brother in *Kung Fu*, Ahab's hunt for the white whale Moby Dick, and Ponce de Leon's search for the fountain of youth.

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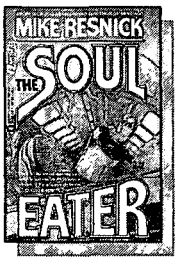
...and when you see me around, ask me about other books you can expect to see from Mike Resnick in the near future.

ALSO THIS MONTH:

THE SOUL EATER

by Mike Resnick



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we were all so stunned by the light, that we didn't have the time or the heart for too many bad feelings.

Or maybe the island *was* somehow a truly different place, set off from the Universe by some Splicer whose forming history was now lost to memory, or too subtle to understand directly. I'd been to other places where a Splicer had made his influence felt, whether for good or ill.

Take the drabness of Birmingham, England, when I'd visited it around the turn of the century. I remembered tracking down the Splicer whose formative Event was the Fall of Christianity. He was this guy who'd watched his sister burned at the stake for being a witch or a Protestant or something. After he'd created his great Splice, he'd degenerated into a melancholy little man who believed only in the ineffable beauty of statistics. Lived in an empty flat in the filthy and contagious Victorian inner-city. I have no idea why he ended up in Birmingham. Maybe he was attracted by the industrial wasteland which so resembled his own being. I remember that he spent his days at the track with the ponies. Muttered High German imprecations when his horse lost, and that's about all the language he could muster. He was tired of it all, but could not die, since his Event had not run its course, and, like me, he could not keep himself from doing a little Splicing. Only in his case, it wasn't minor Splicing. He'd made his city into a soulless place, dreary and rundown.

Vashon was the exact opposite. Whether it was Spliced into such a nice place, or just grew that way naturally, I realized that I did not want to leave. For years, my past had bounded my actions, conditioned my life. It was time to make a stand, to carve out a future. I was startled to realize that I'd become more human than I'd been in a long time. I'd become stubborn.

Cassie broke my reverie with a brush of her hand against my cheek. "You seem kind of shook up, Henry," she said. "I guess that thing was a shock to you as well as me—even if you did make it."

It was amazing how Cassie transformed herself from go-get'em reporter to concerned, nurturing woman. And she never seemed to be two different people in the same body; each personality blended with the other. She was a well-seasoned dish, all right.

"I guess Neadra's electricity is knocked out," Cassie said. It took me a moment to remember that Neadra was the collage woman. "She was working on a new piece; I hope this didn't interrupt her too badly."

"Probably doesn't even know anything happened," I said. "I think that line went to the other side of the island." I was barely paying attention to what I said. The whisky was warming me, calming me down, and Cassie's kindness was lulling me into a pleasant daydreaming state. I felt like I could just look at her for a long time and that would fill every

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need that I had. But I wanted to get her out into the light, watch it play across her face, through her hair. I wanted to take her home with me. She saw the look in my eyes and smiled with warm intelligence. "Okay, Henry," she said, "let's go to your place."

We drove in silence to my house, holding hands. I'd moved to the island twenty years before, and I'd been in this house seventeen of them. It was small, a trifle run down, but homey, cozy. A damn sight better than Cassie's efficiency apartment, and she'd taken to spending more nights here—even had an assortment of clothes in my closet. I fixed us some coffee, and Cassie sat in the living room, watching through the big plate glass window I'd installed as the trees outside blew in the winter wind. I came in and sat beside her.

"It's cold," she said. She was silent for a moment. "I could have died today."

"You're here with me. You're okay." The light was streaming in through the window, dappling Cassie's red-brown hair like the floor of an autumn forest. I ran my fingers through it; it was as fine and silky as dandelion tufts. We kissed, and then kissed some more.

"You still have to explain how you did those things," she said, as I led her toward the bedroom. But for once, she forgot her questions when I took her inside.

We made love among flannel sheets, wrapped in a down comforter. What a life I've gotten used to! I thought. Times were when I would be happy to have a wool point blanket and a level spot of ground to sleep on. Now there was a woman curled around me, the curve of her body under my hand. One thing had not changed. Back then there was a force driving me, a force I was driving, like a cowboy caught in a stampede of his own making. I felt that stampede inside me now, and Cassie was a part of it, bucking and galloping, sometimes in control, sometimes out. We were caught up together in some greater movement, whether higher or just stronger in a brutish way, I could not tell. After a while, we came to a place of rest, as if the cattle were settling down, lowing in the green grass. The question was, was this just a place where the stampede had momentarily run out of steam? Or had we reached the tallgrass country, and home?

We lay snuggled together, breathlessly hanging onto one another. This was good, too. My throat was dry, though, and after a moment, I got up to get us some coffee. We'd abandoned our first cups in the living room, so I went and made us more. Perhaps men cannot resist this urge to get up, to *do* something, after loving a woman. I have never known a woman who liked it, but I have never been able to resist it. In this case, when I got back to bed, Cassie was sitting up, her mind back on the day's events.

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Great, I thought, I gave her a chance to get her train of thought back on the tracks.

"I have to go to the paper and develop this film," she said. "This is hot stuff." She drew a breath and got that rock-hard set to her mouth that meant she was determined that the truth be known and was convinced that she knew exactly what the truth *was*—or enough of it to go to press with, anyway. Like Respects-the-Sun, when she aimed the rifle that killed the horse of the cavalry lieutenant who, as he fell, shot her in the stomach. She had that same flinty look.

I sat down on the bed and handed her her coffee. "*This* is hot," I said.

"I'm going to do this, Henry," she said. She wasn't threatening me, I knew, just informing me of what was going to happen whether I liked it or not. "Those firefighters saw what happened. Do you think that me not printing the pictures will make any difference?"

"Maybe."

"Why?"

"People don't always trust their eyes. And even if they do, the story will be confined to Vashon. If it gets in the paper, word could get *out*. People from other places may find out. People I don't want to ever see again. . . ." My voice trailed off as I looked at her. Beautiful. Set in her ways. I put my coffee down on the headboard and slid into bed on her side, temporarily keeping her from getting up. "That photo can at least wait until we finish up the coffee."

Cassie took a huge swallow and looked up at me slyly. She was quiet, in that dangerous way she had when she was about to interview a hostile subject.

"Okay, Henry, convince me not to run that picture," she said. "Tell me how you made that power pole bounce off of you."

I sighed. Well, I *did* love her, and I *was* planning to tell her about myself at the appropriate time. Maybe that time was now. It is so hard to be certain in matters of the heart. I wrapped one of the sheets around me and sat up, cross-legged, in the bed.

"It didn't bounce off," I said. "I Spliced it out of existence."

"Spliced? As in editing a film?"

"More like joining two ropes," I replied, then, seeing that Cassie didn't get it, added, "You cut off the end of the rope—the train of events—that you don't want to happen, and Splice in the one which you *do* want to happen."

Cassie leaned back and looked me over. "If I hadn't *seen* this with my own eyes, I would say that you were feeding me a bunch of New Age bullshit."

"There's nothing *new* about it. I've been able to do it—well, for a long time."

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"How long?"

Here it came. The one revelation which would lead to all the others. I took a sip of coffee, breathed over the cup, and stared at the swirling forms the steam took before my eyes.

"Um, two hundred and thirty years, more or less," I said.

Cassie snorted, almost spitting coffee onto me and the bed. She *did* get some up her nose, and spent a half-minute coughing it out. I reached to pat her back and help her out, and she pulled away from me.

"*What* are you, Henry?"

"A man."

She didn't look like she believed me.

"Okay. My name is not exactly Henry White," I said. I took another swallow of coffee. This was going to dredge up some memories which I'd just as soon stayed buried.

"I was born by the name Henri Le Blanc," I said. "Trapping was my trade. My father was French and my mother was a squaw. I grew up in north Montana, Cree country—"

"Two hundred and thirty years ago, I suppose," said Cassie.

I nodded. "I lived alone for forty of them, where the bear and the beaver stay." I was slipping back into my French-English patois, left behind for so many years now. "One day, I went and got a wife."

"You're married?" Cassie looked shocked, and gazed around quickly, as if my angry spouse might walk in on us at any moment.

"Was," I said, and the sadness returned. You grow scars, but the tissue is weak. It separates. Years later, you are still bleeding. "She died. Was killed."

"What was her name?" Cassie asked. Her momentary embarrassment was replaced with concern. She took my hand. I pulled it away, rubbed my temples.

"Louisa. Her name was Louisa Dumont," I said. "She was just a whore from Fort Garry. I was a kid. I loved her so. *J'ai l'adoré.*"

For a while I could not continue. Louisa and her yellowed frills, walking down the path to the cabin in the sunlight. Louisa, sweaty and humming, emptying water into a basin.

"What happened?"

"Blackfoot."

"What?"

"It was a lesson for the Company, that's what I thought at first. The North West Company, Cassie. I sold my furs to them. I figured they'd broken some agreement with this band of Blackfoot. But it was *because I was Cree.* The Blackfoot thought I was running rifles to a Cree band they were warring with. I realized that later." There were so many reasons for hate in the world, it was hard to keep them all straight.

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"They killed your wife for that?"

"Yes. That was when I first learned to Splice. That was the big one."

"What are you talking about?"

"I've never changed as much, before or since. I've never had such power to do *whatever I wanted.*"

Cassie seemed irritated at herself for not being able to understand, though I realized that I was explaining mysteries with mysteries. It was a habit people like me got into. You couldn't really put the truth into words, and when you tried to get it straight, it was never quite *right.* People thought you were some kind of wizard or UFO alien. They wanted you to use your powers to save the world, or at least their little part of it. Like the Killbourns, up in Dakota. You ended up killing the neighbors, and all the grain is destroyed by the next big storm anyway. You had to be careful with words, make sure they matched your deeds.

"Things," I said. "Big things—they don't always just *happen.* They hardly *ever* just happen. I don't know *why* this is, really, but I know *how.* Events in history, chains of events that *matter,* are Spliced. Some*body* Splices them."

"You Spliced something when Louisa died," said Cassie. She enunciated her words carefully, as if she were concentrating, trying to understand the meaning of each one.

I drank the last sip of my coffee in my cup.

"I am the Splicer of an Event," I said. "We don't know whether we cause them, or if we evolve along with them, or both."

" 'We'?"

"I've met some of the others over the years. Some I got to be friends with. Some are my enemies."

Cassie let this digest for a while, then asked, "And what was the event *you,* uh, Spliced?"

How to explain such a thing? Historians had spent decades trying to get the words right, to understand what happened and why. Once, I had understood immensities—and caused them—in a single second.

"The Decline of Native America. The Opening of the West," I said. "I was burning up with hatred and sadness. More than I could bear. My chest had three arrows in it, and one of them was clear through me and pinning me to the wall of the cabin. Louisa was full of arrows." *Fire, I was on fire. The air was fire and heat. Twisting, twisting around the arrow, but it would not come out. One strange Twist, and I had broken free. Maybe I was supposed to die and somehow the death got screwed up. I was in the Cutting Room, flowing amidst the lymph of the universes. There was no question of knowing how to Splice. The whole place was Knowledge, Technique. All I had to do was use my hatred as a cutting edge, use my grief as a glue. Louisa. Ah, my sweet, dying Louisa.* "A

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Blackfoot brave came in through the window. Louisa was closest to him, so he took his tomahawk to her—" *The slice through her scalp-meat. The splintering crack of rock on bone.* "I Spliced." *Hate. Hate, rage, and hate.*

I had unknowingly taken Cassie's hand again and was kneading it. She was so completely unlike Louisa. No frills here. No timidity and submission. But now I was older, so much older; I appreciated independence and intelligence in a woman.

"You raised her from the dead?"

If only I'd had that power! So much would have been better, so much would have been changed. "No. That had already *happened.* You can only sever the present. There's no changing the *past.* You can't splice backward." *Louisa, dead, her scalp sloughing off, her flowing black hair matted and bloody.*

"What did you do?"

"I Spliced in a curse upon the Red Man, all of them," I said in a low voice. "All the wrongness in my soul came out, I wanted revenge so bad. I wanted Louisa back so bad. I listened to the racism of those Scots who ran the Company. I believed in the French trappers' casual exploitation. It had got woven into my soul without my even noticing it, and me half Cree. So I Spliced in the coming of the white man, the taking of native land. Europe-spawned epidemics had been bad before, but I made them worse, devastating. I devastated everything Indian. It would have been hard for them even *without* my Splice. But it wouldn't have been so horrible, so evil. Their culture would have survived, and come out strong and almost free of bitterness."

"Baby," said Cassie, "You must have hurt so much."

Her words brought me back to myself, back to a measure of control. Whether she believed me or not, she knew that *I* thought I was telling the truth, and that the truth was painful to me.

"Yes. No. There's really no excuse. I didn't think it would actually change the world, but I *wanted* it to. I didn't believe I had the power. But I lived to see the new strand I'd Spliced in expressing itself. God, yes, I lived to see it *all*—"

I tried to take more coffee, but it was all gone and all I got was bitter, bitter dregs.

"A Splicer is tied to his Event," I said. "Like electricity is linked by the law of nature to magnetism in light. We are, I guess, something like the glue that holds the Event in place. I don't know." All I knew was that my Event had pulled me into itself with a strange, unstoppable force.

Wandering the Rocky Mountains. Watching in glee as the red people were overrun, cheated, as they died in droves. Dancing in mad glee across the plains as Europe crushed them under bullets and wagon wheels. As the white hordes came to take everything from the ones who took everything

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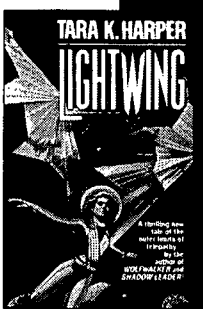

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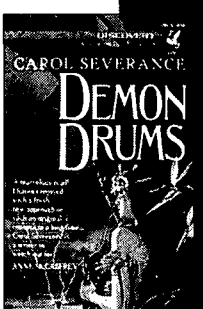

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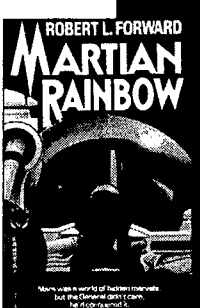

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from me. The slaughter and disease. Manifest Destiny. The inexorable March of History. History I had made.

Then, after years, sickening years, the growing revulsion at myself. Knowing I had to either die or go completely insane. Stumbling into Respects-the-Sun's band. Begging them to kill me. Only she could have seen any goodness in me. Then the slow workings of love and mercy. And her death. Stop what you have started, Henri, she'd told me as she died. You had the horror; now you have the love. And her blasted guts and her soft autumn eyes and once again there was nothing *I could do, because the Splicing is bounded by time, and the bullet had already done its work. Except I could hold her. I could hold her and think: I have started something I cannot stop, something I despise and cannot stop. I have to stop this thing.*

"After the hatred . . . burned itself down . . . I thought I could control it, fix things so that the west could be settled in peace." *Leading the wagon trains to the Willamette Valley. Fishing whole families out of certain drowning in the foamy Columbia.* "It took me years to understand that whenever I Spliced, my work ended up hurting people in the long run, killing them sometimes."

"You saved *my* life," Cassie said. "I don't see what the harm is in *that*."

I was silent. She was right. Maybe this once, I will get away with it, I thought. Maybe it will be all right.

"Now the frontier's all settled," said Cassie. "The deed is done, one way or another."

"Yes," I said. "I can feel that. I came here to the island to settle down, to rest. To grow old and die, like a real man should. My Event has nearly run its course."

"Settle down with me?" said Cassie.

I looked at her, stroked her hand. There was only one deed, in the end, that was worth repeating. We spent the middle of the afternoon making love again—this time as slow and easy as wind passing over the plains, bending the grass, but not breaking it.

I talked Cassie into one more stop by the tavern before she went and developed her film. She was determined to develop the film and check to see if the camera had also seen what her own eyes had. She'd promised she wasn't going to publish the photos, and I trusted her. Nevertheless, she didn't have faith in my explanation, I suspected, but believed that the true answer was something more *legitimately* arcane, like ESP or mass-suggestion. What she was really hoping for, I figured, was for me to change my mind and to tell her to go ahead and use the pictures in the paper after all. She knew me as an easy-going and pliant fellow, but this was one stand I would not back down from.

How could I adequately explain to her the wordless dread which filled

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me? I could not say that an article in an unknown weekly would draw destruction down upon us. It seemed silly, just saying it. But I knew the kind of hurt I'd caused before. It was the kind that brooded in dark and secret places, that gleaned the world with eager, careful hands, waiting for its chance to strike. Words and pictures could not exist in abstract "newspaper space." Words lead to *actions,* and actions, in the end, spoke louder than words, overbore them. They could cause words to never be heard again. Words like freedom. Words like peace.

As we walked to the door, I noticed a car across the street from the bar that looked vaguely familiar, but then, just about every car on Vashon looked familiar to me after twenty years. Still, there was something else about it. I glanced over. But there was nothing. The sun was glinting off its windshield, and I gave up trying to see whether there was anybody in it. It's my old paranoia setting in, I thought. I was a little sad to know that it was back, but I might be needing it soon enough.

We walked inside. Tanya was glad to see us, that we were okay, and gave us the old up and down eyebrows treatment to let us know that she knew *exactly* what we'd been doing.

"Beers," I said. "Pretzels. The works." We went and found a table and Tanya went to get our stuff.

That was when all hell broke loose in the Island Tavern. Suddenly, somebody was opening a lot of Wounds, and it *wasn't* me.

I stood up, spun around. Darkness was seeping into the room like black veils, though it was still light outside. The darkness was wafting out of the plethora of Wounds which every table and chair formed with the floor. Quickly, the veils seemed to turn themselves inside out, like a magician's trick. They became luminous scarves, of unearthly, beautiful material, blowing lazily toward me with the inexorable glide of a shark school.

Oh shit, I thought. A Splicer has found me out. A Splicer in touch with very strange realities.

"Neadra," said Cassie. There the woman was, standing in the doorway to the tavern. The car; I thought. I saw it this morning at the collage woman's house. There was the shine of power, the smell of burning rope, which accompanied a Splicer's working in the world, if you knew what signs to look for. Her flattened head formed a straight black line, backlit by the sunlight from outside.

"Who are you?" I asked. Neadra did not reply. "You're Chinook; I can see that." The scarves began a manic dance about me, whirling into a mesmerizing pattern. A pattern I was beginning to recognize. Indian realities. Thunderbird. Just as the electricity had defined my monster, the scarves were delimiting one of the beasts which had haunted my

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nightmares for two hundred years. Rain spirit of the Chinook and countless other Pacific people. Capricious god.

"You destroyed my people, old man," said the woman in the doorway. "Last time you got away from me. Now I am strong. It is time for you to *pay*."

So *that's* who you are, I thought. No wonder she'd looked me over so intently when I'd dropped Cassie off. I'd met her before, though I hadn't seen her in years. She'd been so young then, so young and angry. Waiilatpu, she'd called herself then, The Place-of-the-Rye-Grass. It was the name of a place in Oregon where a band of Cayuse had killed all the whites in a mission. It was the only Indian victory in a bloody campaign to subdue all of the native people of the Oregon interior. But that was years ago, and I was elsewhere, trying to put out bigger fires at the time.

I had met Neadra on the high plains, after she'd left Oregon. She'd been new, inexperienced, wandering the west full of anguish and the bitter hope of revenge. It had been easy to escape her. She'd become a Splicer as she watched her father being hanged in Oregon City for the mission massacre. He was Chinook, and not even remotely near the mission at the time. Neadra had not known that it was *me* who'd started the chain of events which led inevitably to her father's death. I was just another white man to hate. That was her Event, Native American Pain. Native American Revenge. All I wanted at the time was to get away from her. That was all I wanted *now*. But Neadra knew who I was this time, and she had other plans for me.

Thunderbird flapped a great wing across the room and sent me sprawling, crashing through tables and chairs. It was a glancing blow, or He would have killed me. I tried to concentrate, to find a Wound somewhere. What could I call up to defend me that wouldn't wreak havoc on everyone else in the tavern, or on the whole island for that matter? Nothing, really. Controlling a hybrid splice required undisturbed thought. I wasn't going to get any of that here.

"I found you!" Neadra yelled hoarsely. "I set my traps and followed the spoor!"

The branch over the powerlines. The perfect Wound. She'd grown more clever over the years, I'd give her that.

I realized that in order to fight her I was going to have to hate her *more* than I cared about the well-being of those around me. I didn't think I had that kind of hate in me anymore.

I half-heartedly opened a Wound, using the enclosing space of a chair knocked over against a tilting table. Something pitiful and squirming came out of it, like an ugly caterpillar, and I frantically Spliced it to a few threads of reality. Thunderbird bent down, and, with His huge beak, ate my little horror all up, like a robin gulping a worm. Then the beast

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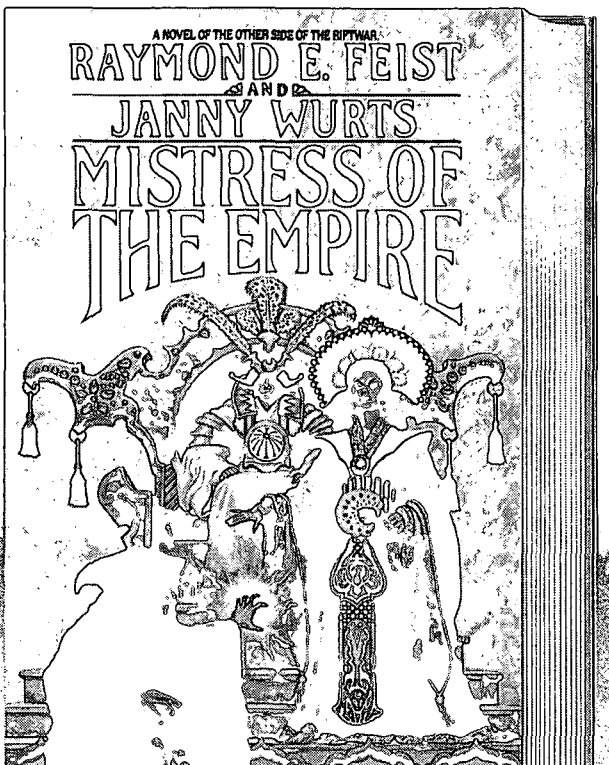

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turned his bleak, inhuman eye to *me*. He squawked in the growling, mean way of a bird of prey about to make a kill.

Then the room strobed with a series of flashes. Neadra was screaming, "Stop that! Stop that, you little bitch!" It was Cassie she was yelling at—Cassie, who was setting off the flash on her camera over and over in Neadra's eyes, breaking her concentration.

Neadra stumbled back a step or two, and Cassie charged. She cracked the camera right over Neadra's head, shattering it and exposing all the film to the sunlight coming in the tavern's door. So much for the photograph, I thought. But I didn't have time to feel any relief over that.

With an angry roar, Neadra struck back at Cassie. Neadra was opening herself as a Wound. I could sense the world fraying all about her. She was going to unravel Cassie, choose a new reality where Cassie didn't exist. I could feel the change in my own understanding of events, my participation, using the new sense I'd gained since I'd first entered the Cutting Room. This was how she knew I was here, I thought. She could *feel* it when I Spliced the universe to keep that power pole from hitting me, just as I could feel *her* now. I had to do something. There was no way that Cassie could stand up to this. Frantically, I tried to Wound myself.

What I managed was feeble, and it barely did the job. Instead of being wiped out of existence, Neadra's Splicing was mitigated by my own. It threw Cassie backward, against the wall. Cassie slumped downward and cried out in pain. But that at least let me know she was still alive and kept me from complete despair.

Neadra turned away from her and regained control of Thunderbird. I am going to die, I thought. I am going to die in revenge for my own hatred. Was that all it meant in the end, all it came down to: hate, revenge, more hate, more revenge? Were those the only principles which animated this corpse of a universe, which kept it twitching? Thunderbird caught me in a big claw and held me down on the wooden floor as if I were a helpless mouse. I wondered when those much-vaunted endorphins were going to flood my brain and ease my passage into the next world with the best from nature's pharmacy.

I saw the beak. I saw it descending, and I started quivering. After these many years, I was going to die for my sins. There was no redemption, no grace. I *deserved* what was coming.

And I *would* have died, if it hadn't been for Tanya. I should have known she was a Splicer. All the signs were there. I should have even guessed what her Event was, what unfolding of history she accompanied. But then, most of the Splicers I had met up with, people like the Fall of Christianity Splicer, or Neadra, were the products—or the producers—of cataclysmic, regrettable happenings, whether sudden or long and drawn out.

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Tanya was *new,* barely come into the ability. Yet she Spliced with authority—but mild, mild as bread on water. Thunderbird couldn't help it; He cocked His head in her direction. It was like He'd heard His god-mate calling from deep within the Wound which Tanya had made of herself. Calling Him to fly away, to find love and peace.

Peace.

That was Tanya. The sixties were where she was from. The best stuff from the sixties was in her: fellowship, good nature, natural goodness, care for your neighbor, peace. It was all there in the Splice she was forming, the knot of goodness she was creating. I felt the new strand of future flow through me like the best whisky, the finest homegrown marijuana. The tension that was so long in me, that was a *part* of me, eased. Something was different. Something was better.

"No!" said Neadra, rising up like a small but irate doll in the doorway. "My people will have justice!"

Tanya barely spared her a glance. "Get out of my bar," she said in her quiet, firm voice. "This is not the way to get justice."

"I demand—"

"Nobody demands anything in my place but *me,*" Tanya said. "Nobody *does* anything that hurts other people and gets away with it in *my* bar." Now she was looking straight at Neadra. The woman seemed to slump under that stare, as if she'd been rapped in the stomach—not hard, but enough to make an impression.

Neadra looked at me with pure fury. "I knew you were around here. I can't fight the two of you, but now I know *exactly* where you are."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm very sorry about what I did."

Neadra didn't seem to have an answer to this. She just glared at me some more, then turned around and stalked away.

Cassie was catching her breath and sitting up against the wall. I went over to see if she was all right.

"Don't worry about *that* one," said Tanya, nodding toward Neadra. "I'm stronger than her. A *lot* stronger. There's going to be peace on this island while I'm around." She started straightening up the mess we'd made of her place. "It took me a long time to pick up on you," she told me. "You've kept a low profile since you've been here."

"Why aren't *you* in San Francisco or somewhere like that?" I asked.

"Mutants," she replied, righting a chair. "This island is where the sixties *stayed.*"

"It's where *you* stayed," I said. "Now I understand why it felt like such a special place." Tanya just smiled and went on cleaning up.

I helped Cassie to her feet, and we found a couple of upright chairs and sat down. "Guess I led Neadra to you," she said.

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"She's been looking for me for a long time," I said. "She would have found me sooner or later."

"It's all true, isn't it. You're the Spirit of the West."

"Manifest Destiny in my pockets," I said. "I make my bed in buffalo hides and heat my house with prairie fires."

Then Cassie got that look in her eyes, like the Statue of Liberty's torch alight with a bonfire of red censorship pencils. "I'm going to have to report on this. The people have a right to know."

Damn if she wasn't a Splicer of a kind, in her own right. She just wouldn't give up on trying to make her mark. Action News girl. I probably had never been so in love with the woman. She was looking around furtively for something or another, but I pulled her to me and kissed her good and hard.

After awhile, Tanya brought over some more drinks on a tray, along with something black and pitiful. This was what Cassie had been searching for. It was her camera, smashed up beyond repair. Grasping the poor thing between her thumb and forefinger, Tanya handed it to Cassie. Cassie took it and sat considering it for a moment.

"Well, it *will* be hard to print the story anywhere but *Paranormal Today* without photos for proof," I said. "But feel free to *try*. And anyway, the sun is setting on the Old West. I'm changing from whatever it is that I was . . . back into Henri Le Blanc. I can feel it in my bones, and it feels good."

Cassie considered this for a long while. Looking for an angle, I thought, looking for the stray thread which curled inward and held the knowledge of the entire rope in its windings. "Still, I'm going to keep my eye on you," she finally said. "I'm going to stick close, and I'm going to be watching you."

I took a drink. I was tempted to look into the Cutting Room, to find a reality where Cassie would not hound me and Splice it in. But I didn't really want to do anything of the sort. Cassie sticking closer to me, staying nearby? I wouldn't mind that. Maybe my Splicing didn't *always* bring pain into the world like I'd thought, but it wasn't such a bad idea to let events take their natural course without paying a whole lot of attention. A fellow could be a little *too* careful, after all. I'd known that, long ago, back when I was setting traps, running the lines. That hadn't been such a bad life. Doing what you could, living where you wanted. Loving the life you had. Cassie'd better watch out; old Henri Le Blanc might be back for good. The only load on old Henri's back was a passel of beaver skins. And Henri was a damn fine trapper. ●

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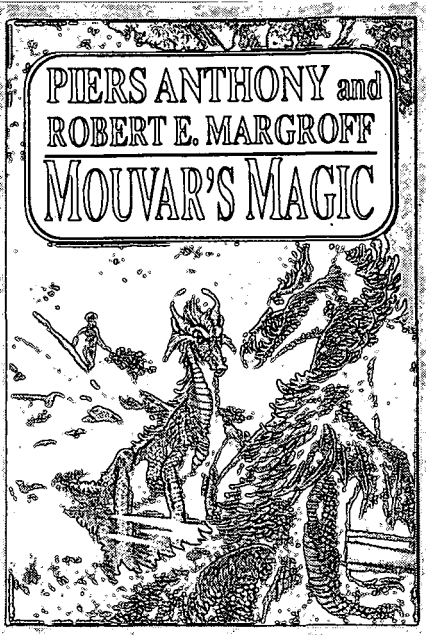

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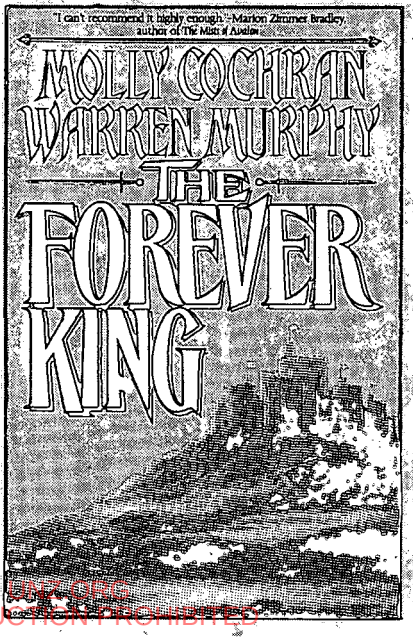

TOR BOOKS

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Greg Costikyan

Greg Costikyan's maternal grandfather, John Holmgren, was a noted commercial illustrator who worked for the *Saturday Evening Post* and other magazines, as well as for such advertisers as Cities Service and Ford Motors. He served as president of the Society of Illustrators in the fifties, and died of Parkinson's disease in the mid-sixties. The author's memories of his grandfather provided some of the inspiration for....

A DOE, IN CHARCOAL

art: Steve Cavallo

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This is a true story, or anyway, as true a story as makes no difference.

My mother and aunt and sister and cousins, we all grew up in a big house in Freedom, New Hampshire. My mother and aunt grew up a little while before my sister and cousins and I, of course. But for all of us, that was where our memories were green.

It was a big old farmhouse. It had been a country inn, once, and the doors were all numbered, as if they were still the rooms of a hotel. Even with my grandmother and the whole extended family, plus four cats and a dog and assorted mice and ants in the pantry, we didn't really fill it up. There were always rooms that no one used. One of them was the parlor. We didn't use it, nor the whole front of the house; when people came to visit, they came in the side door, by the porch.

At night, my parents would tell me it was time to go to bed, and I would have to leave the warm living room—with the fire in its great hearth, and my cousins playing games on the rag rug, and my father and my uncle smoking their pipes companionably, and my mother and aunt and grandmother with their knitting or crocheting or rugmaking—and go into the cold, dark parlor, through it to the front stairs, and up to my room.

It was more than dark in the parlor. No one went there, so the furniture was worn and old and shabby. And there was a pump organ that didn't do anything but wheeze when you worked the pedals. But there was something else there. I could feel it. The parlor was haunted.

I used to run through it as fast as I could—but even so, I could feel the touch of something cold on my spine.

I told my mother that, once. She said, "No . . . No. The parlor isn't haunted." But she said it with the slightest stress on the word "parlor"—as if something *else* might be haunted. That didn't make me feel any better.

My grandfather had bought the house. My grandfather; I never really knew him. I have only the memory of sitting on his lap as he drew something with charcoal on a pad. I cannot have been older than three at the time. He was a professional illustrator; he drew marvelous pictures, to illustrate stories, advertisements, and for his own amusement. Scattered about the house were his "Freedom drawings," depictions of our town and the people in it; unlike his other work, they were not drawn for money, but simply because he wanted to draw them. I liked them best.

My grandfather died quite young, of Parkinson's disease. In the final stage of Parkinson's, your limbs tremble uncontrollably. That, I always thought, was a particularly terrible fate for a man who made his living by drawing.

I said I grew up in that house. That isn't quite so; I never spent more

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than two months out of every year there. Most of the time, I lived back in the city with my parents, going to school. But in the summers, we went up to Freedom and lived in the big house with our cousins; and those were the best times, the true times.

The part of the house I liked best was what they called the studio. It was an add-on, not originally part of the house; it was an attic, really, built above a shed. It wasn't heated, and couldn't be used in the winter. But my parents used to sleep there during the summers.

My grandfather had used it as his studio. It had a big plate glass window facing the hill, to let in the light. It was bare-timbered, with dark beams criss-crossing the open space above. Against one wall were the fishing rods and wooden skis my grandfather had used. There were drawers full of pictures; a table where he had worked; oil paints turning solid in their tubes, unused since he had died; brushes of all sizes; colored pencils and pastels. I remember my mother sitting at his desk, and staring out the window, up the hill toward the pines. She loved that room as much as I, I think; the dark wood, the smell of it, the coolness even on the hottest days. But I wonder, sometimes, what it is my mother saw, out that window; what it is she heard, sitting there, at my grandfather's desk.

We used to pack picnic lunches and hike up the hill above the house. It was covered with woods and patches of meadow; pine groves and juniper bracken, stone fences built by long-ago farmers, glacial boulders, and rippling little streams. We would clamber over rocks, climb trees, and explore.

Once, I was climbing along a stone wall, through white pine, needles scenting the air, so far from the rest of the family that I could not hear them. Yet I did not feel lost; I could easily find them by walking back along the wall. In midsummer, at midday, in the forest, there is little sound; no birdsong, no insect noise, only the gentle soughing of the wind in the trees.

I topped a rise. There, not ten feet distant, was a little brook, tumbling down a notch; and standing above it, nose to the water, was a doe. I froze, astonished; I had never seen one, not so close; they are shy creatures. She was surprisingly small; one tends to think that deer are large as horses, but they are not. Her legs looked awkwardly long; she was spotted with white; she—she looked up, perhaps scenting me at last; spotted me, and instantly disappeared, disappeared into the wood.

And . . . that was that. I stood for a long moment, reluctant to turn back; but it was unlikely I would see the doe again. I turned, to descend the hill, to find my cousins.

I went to the studio often, sometimes to escape the heat of a summer day; sometimes to find my parents; sometimes to look at my grandfather's

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books. He had many there, books with pictures of people in costumes, books with pictures of buildings and scenery; he had used them in drawing his own pictures, no doubt. I used to pore over them for hours.

One day I went there, and took a particular favorite, a book that showed people in historical dress, and sat in my grandfather's chair. It was afternoon; the sun was behind the hill, and the light was already beginning to dim, the air beginning to cool, the mosquitoes that plague New Hampshire summers beginning to venture forth. My mother had put a sketch pad on my grandfather's desk, and had jotted some notes on it; call so-and-so, pay the tab at the village store, take the wash to the laundromat. I sat with the book on my lap, turning pages, head bent over to study the pictures in the dimming light. From the corner of my eye, I caught motion; a fly, perhaps. I waved a hand absently; not a fly. A fly would duck, respond somehow to my wave. Its motion was steady, a curve through space. . . .

I looked up from the book and stared ahead, already feeling a chill, not quite wanting to know what that motion might be. But I could not put it off forever; my only options were to look, or to flee; and to flee was excessively childish, even at my age then.

I turned my head.

No fly, that was certain. It was a thin tube of black, three inches long: a length of drawing charcoal. It hung in the air, warm afternoon light shining on it, unsupported; hung in the air as nothing could hang. I gawped at it, realizing the impossibility, but searching still for an explanation. The charcoal moved in an arc, through space; one end touched the sketch pad.

And there it hung, one end against the paper, for a long moment, as if its motion had tired it. The full insanity of this had struck me; goosepimples sprouted on my arms; I was frozen, unable to move.

The charcoal moved before I; moved in a broad curve against the paper, a single line; lifted, to touch the paper not far distant, and moved again. A line; a line; a line; and in the space of no more than five seconds, blank paper was transformed to the recognizable outline of a doe.

Sometime in there, I cannot say when, fear was transformed to wonder; perhaps I should say, one form of awe to another. I was still transfixed; still unable to move. I watched as the doe was better realized, strokes and rustles of the charcoal filling in details. It was a doe, drinking at a brook, downhill from the viewer; the doe, precisely as I had seen her, there, on the hill above the house: the hill that faced the studio.

After—oh, a minute, two minutes; long months of frozen awe—the charcoal tottered, landed against the paper, and rolled, down the slope of the drafting table, into the gutter that held pens and pencils.

And . . . that was that.

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Trembling, I reached out; tore the sheet from the pad of paper; ran through the house to my room; and hid the rendering, stowed it away under my socks and underwear, under an ancient Sears catalog that had been in my dresser since time immemorial.

I took it back to the city when that summer ended. From time to time, I would pull it out and study it again. It was mine, I knew; it was *for* me. I had no ready explanation for its origin; I could not articulate my attachment to the drawing; yet I felt an intensely personal ownership of it. My vision—my sight of the doe had, in some mysterious fashion, engendered the picture, was that not so?

Years later, studying the picture, I realized what a fool I had been. Of course the house was haunted; how could it not be? When we went up the hill to picnic, my grandmother and mother and aunt and sister and cousins and I, was there not someone missing? Someone bearing an easel and pencils, to sketch while we played? When we piled in the car to go skiing, how could we fail to miss the bewhiskered man bearing his wooden skis, who had struggled up the slopes of his hill before there were commercial ski slopes, who had taught his daughters to ski, who had introduced my father to the slopes? When my mother sat at his desk, the oil paints left unchanged from the day he died, his sketch pad ready for the pen, with whom else did she commune? When we sat in the living room, the fire in the hearth, the children lying on the rug and playing cards, he was there: in his paintings on the wall, in the table he had built himself, in the memories of an old woman hooking a rug.

I showed my mother the picture, once, not long ago. She studied it for a while, and said, "That's a nice one. I haven't seen it before. Where did you find it?"

"Oh," I said, "when I was a boy, I found it in one of the wooden files in the studio, and I hid it in my room because I liked it. I've had it ever since."

She looked at me oddly, wondering, no doubt, why I had hidden it; if I had asked for it, they would have framed it for me.

But she confirmed what I had long suspected.

It was by his hand. ●

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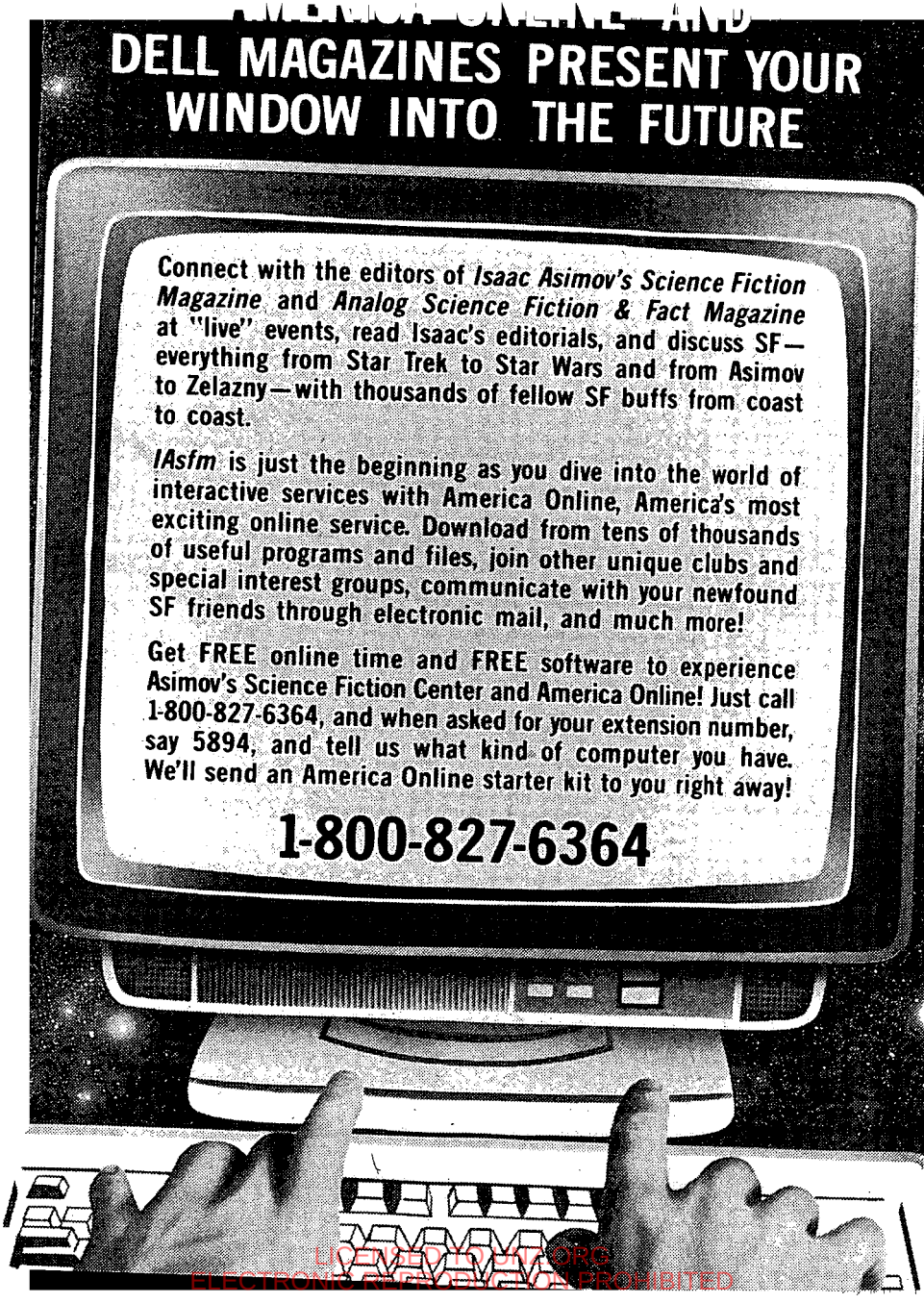

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NOW THAT WE HAVE EACH OTHER

Steven Utley

Vivid glimpses of the distant past may seem more real than life in a lonely present...

He had baited the gang hooks with bits of balao and put the line out in three hundred feet of water. Now he sat in the stern, with a finger on the line to monitor interest. The backs of his long, sinewy hands were as black as earth itself, the palms pink, callused, and grooved by the uncountable miles of fishing line he had played out and hauled in during his lifetime. He couldn't imagine why these facts suddenly seemed so interesting. His son sat in the bow, a ghostly figure. It was white weather, when haze covered the sea and even a cautious fisherman who didn't go out far could lose sight of land. Then there was nothing to do except wait to see if the haze would clear, hope that a wave wouldn't swamp the slender boat, and keep fishing. Beside him, the woman stirred. He turned his head to tell her to be still, he could feel a good fish nosing at his bait, but she was coming out of it and drawing him out of it as well. The tension against his finger suddenly relaxed, as if the line had been snapped. He looked at his hand and saw that it must be so, for there was no line there. He looked forward, but his son and the boat were gone. He saw only the light fixture in the center of the ceiling, heard only automobile sounds from the motel parking lot.

Colbert had glanced at the clock on the night table as he felt himself go. He looked at it now and thought, Four minutes. Four minutes to live out another man's life. For a moment—for only a moment, he knew—he held in his head a single great compressed sort of memory of that life, as vivid, complete, and complicated as that he held of his own. The fisherman had been illiterate, impoverished, but not stupid, able to read seas and skies, able to tell from the tautness in a length of fishing line whether he had hooked a red fish or a shark, and he, and his, and it

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suddenly felt dreamlike. Colbert tried to hold on to the details even as they faded, but the harder he tried, the more he misremembered. Where had the fisherman lived? Somewhere in the somewhere—a place name that meant nothing to him, eluded him, left him forever. *When* had he lived? In some pre-industrial time, probably. Most human history was pre-industrial, the boat had lacked a motor, but that could mean either pre-industrial time or else only that its owner couldn't afford a motor. It had lacked a compass, too. Colbert didn't know what that might mean; he would have to read up on compasses. He would have to become used, again, to always having questions but not always having answers. Where, when, what. Who. A fisherman. Who, who fished, who had a wife, children—Colbert couldn't remember their names, their faces, his children, no, that other man's children but, still, he had held them as infants, educated them in the ways of the sea, *known them.* He couldn't remember the fisherman's name, either, and he had *been him.*

He sighed, took a Kleenex from a box on the nightstand, wiped a smear of drool from the corner of his mouth. From the outside, time-travel did look just like epilepsy. The woman lying on the other bed moaned. The blinds were closed, and the light in the room was gray, but there was enough of it for him to see her face. Slivers of white showed between her slitted eyelids. Her face twitched, and her fingers and feet. She moaned again, relaxed. He heard her murmur, "Sorry. Sorry. I let go."

"It's okay."

"No. I mean—"

"It's okay."

"So tired."

That was normal. He was tired himself. He said, "Close your eyes. Just rest for a while."

"Got to get up."

"I won't let you oversleep."

"Mm."

She drifted away. Colbert felt himself start to drift away, tried not to go anywhere, fell into a doze thinking that he was still awake, that he was dutifully recording what he could recall of the latest episode in his notebook. In this state, he found himself remembering nights when, unable to sleep, he had lain torturing himself with thoughts of all he had had but had no longer. He remembered, too, nights when he had slept but dreamed only of his losses, the ancient places barred to him, the ancient lives denied him, and awakened shuddering, sweaty, filled with despair.

One day, he had suddenly and unexpectedly discovered that he could no longer do it. So had begun the worst period of his life.

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Then, another day, after what had become, for him, a normal night brimming with normal loneliness and sleeplessness, he felt it like a blow between the eyes. He was making his ponderous and unconcerned way through the rotunda of the state capitol, following the curve of the wall to avoid getting tourists underfoot, when he abruptly sagged against the wainscoting, under the framed portrait of a nineteenth-century governor with an excess of facial hair.

His first thought, though there was no real pain, was *Heart attack?* His second was *Stroke?* He was old enough and out-of-shape enough to worry about such things. Tourists, a family of four in full summer plumage, stood close by; the parents seemed to be looking interestedly either at him or else at the portrait above his head. Colbert experienced a deep tremor of embarrassment, thought wildly, Can't die here, can't mess myself in public, but the tremor subsided all at once, there was something very comforting about Uncle Ainsley's easy handling of the horses, the animals' smell, creak of leather, jounce of good carriage springs, her sister Eliza no Elizabeth no Elspeth twin sister Elspeth was a reassuring presence, too, and Mama looked as pretty as always, though she had spent the night sleepless and crying. Uncle Ainsley stopped the wagon near the crest of the knoll overlooking the railroad tracks, and Mama said Now, Elspeth, Amelia, mind your frocks. They were lovely frocks indeed, crisp, white, new, Mama had been up most of the night finishing them, Great-Grandfather's costume, too, and weeping weeping weeping, loudly enough for her daughters to hear her and begin weeping themselves, and Elspeth clutched her hand under the bedclothes and fervently prayed Our Heavenly Father please let Papa come home soon. Now she and Elspeth were cross from lack of rest, and her eyes felt gummy though she had washed her face, but Mama leaned toward her, adjusted her collar, smiled, said Your papa will be so proud when he sees you. Yes, Mama, she and Elspeth answered automatically and in unison, and almost teared up again but didn't because neither of them wanted to cry in front of Uncle Ainsley, whom they had agreed they would one day marry. They scrambled out of the carriage while Uncle Ainsley stepped down in front, hobbled the horses, and first helped Mama descend, then Great-Grandfather. The girls' mood suddenly improved as they spotted some lovely flowers among the rocks, and they made to go pick them, but Mama called them back sharply, saying Hurry up, girls, your papa will be here soon, and the five of them moved over the crest of the knoll, she and Elspeth running ahead, Mama following at a genteel pace, with her parasol spread to protect her fair skin, and occasionally pausing to look at the two men, who were bringing up the rear. Uncle Ainsley urged Great-Grandfather along the slope with patient words and impatient looks. It wasn't yet mid-morning, but the day was scorching hot. Dust

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was collecting on her frock, and when she tried to brush it away her sweaty palm left a smeary handprint and she knew her mother would scold her for it. Now they were on the knollside above the railroad tracks, which curved out of sight in both directions. Pointing with both arms, Elspeth said That way's New York and that way's Washington. Uncle Ainsley glanced at his watch. Mama gazed off in what Elspeth said was the direction of New York. Great-Grandfather sat on a nearby rock, tired, glistening with perspiration, clutching his knees with gnarled, spotted hands. Dark semicircles of dampness were spreading under the arms of his patched-together Revolutionary War regimentals. Mama looked at the panting red-faced old man and said We never should have made him come, to which Uncle Ainsley replied He insisted, he'll be all right, it wasn't such a hard climb. Mama turned and said Elspeth, Amelia, get ready, take your places, Papa's train is coming, and there indeed was the plume of black smoke rising above the trees, marking the approach of the train from New York. Uncle Ainsley unfurled the flag and held it up; the breeze plucked at it disinterestedly. Great-Grandfather took the flag and positioned himself between the two girls on a slight rocky prominence. As the train came into sight, Mama and Uncle Ainsley drew aside so as not to diminish the dramatic effect of the tableau. Go on, now, girls, Mama called out, take your positions, and the girls knelt beside the old man, stretched forth their arms in appeal to Heaven, lifted their faces and eyes in a prayerful attitude, held the pose. The old man rolled a watery blue eye at her the way an anxious horse might. Beaded salty moisture gathered on her upper lip and streamed tickling down her sides under her clothes. When the train came abreast of the rocky knoll, she could not resist the temptation to lower her gaze. Passenger cars and freight cars swept by packed with men in blue uniforms. It was a perfect moment. The breeze stiffened just enough to catch the flag and make it snap but not tumble Great-Grandfather off the rocks. He hallooed, not hoarsely and wheezily as she would have expected but with full-throated resonance, For God and Union, boys! Victory! Victory! and some of the soldiers pointed to the tableau as they rolled past and some waved their caps and shook their muskets and hallooed back, barely audibly above the train's chuff rattle and clack. Then an enormous burning lump of anguish filled her throat as she tried but failed to pick Papa out of that multitude of blurry faces and identical forms. A cinder landed at the corner of her eye, and that settled it, she dropped her arms, fell over and skinned her elbow on the rocks, began bawling. Through tears, she became aware of Uncle Ainsley; he was holding her by one arm, peering into her face, with his handkerchief poised to wipe away the offending grit. Behind him, Elspeth was crying too, and Mama was staring disconsolately after a retreating plume of black smoke. There was more after

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that, too much for Colbert to retain, though he had an impression of many days and seasons tumbling one after the other, of meals eaten, places visited, persons spoken to, pains suffered, culminating in a last moment of suffocating closeness as though someone else were crowded into Amelia's head and Amelia's life besides himself and Amelia herself.

Tourists, a family of four in full summer plumage, stared as he rebounded from the wainscoting in the rotunda of the capitol. He forced himself to stand erect and look okay. He pretended not to notice that the tourists had noticed him. The father in the group seemed uncertain, the mother, alarmed. Each grabbed a child, and since the mother was already holding the father's arm, they moved away like a giant, polychromatic centipede. Nothing else seemed different; Colbert estimated that the entire episode had lasted only a couple of seconds.

That was when he saw her by the far wall. She was about thirty years old and dressed for office work. She had the color of wet concrete and was clutching her handbag to herself as if it were the only solid thing in existence. No one else was paying any attention to her.

He went straight over, cutting through flocks of tourists shepherded by determinedly perky guides. As he approached, he expected her to notice him, but she kept staring fixedly at a point in the air just in front of herself. When he came within a few feet, he felt the blow again and felt himself stumble, heard the babble in the rotunda change pitch and tempo, saw the light change from off-white to amber. One moment he was breathing cool, familiar-tasting air, the next, hot dusty sour smells of unwashed human bodies, tired animals, whole fish lying on mats on the rough pavement, meat cooking over smoky fires, a whiff of fecal matter from somewhere, dark-skinned people mouths speaking hands gesturing market market square market day cloudless blue sky sour air and he thought *yes yes oh yessss* wanting to give in to it go with it but remembered what he was about told himself who he was where he was what this was and suddenly it went away, he was in the rotunda of the capitol, standing directly in front of the woman, who still appeared not to have noticed him. She was looking through him, at a scene who knew how many hundreds or thousands of years away.

"Let me help you," he said.

She started, blinked several times, stared at him. Her eyes seemed not quite focused. When he extended his pink, baby-soft hand, she regarded it stuporously.

"I'll take you someplace where you can sit and rest," he said, and led her out of the building, murmuring encouragingly, like Uncle Albert—Uncle Alfred? Alvin?—to the old man in the Continental Army clothes, and trying to make it look to any onlooker as if she belonged with him. Being so close to her, holding her, made Colbert itch all over.

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He could feel the power uncoil within himself, or the force embrace him from without. Whichever, whatever—this woman was triggering it, and it was all he could do to resist surrendering to it, throwing his arms about her, letting it happen uncontrollably. But he did resist. Outside, he made her sit on a pink-granite bench in the shadow of the building and told her, in a low, calm voice, "I don't know if this is the first time it's happened to you, but it used to happen to me all the time."

She started to shake her head, grimaced, pressed her fingers against her temples. "I'm okay," she said. "Really, I'm—"

"My name is Colbert. We need to talk about what just happened to you back there."

"Are you a doctor?" Her color was improving, and she was starting to realize that an immensely fat man, a complete stranger, had hustled her out of a public building in broad daylight. She kept her face toward his, but her eyes looked nervously past him, searching for a policeman, a security guard, anybody.

"I'm an office worker just like you," Colbert said. "We have something else in common, too."

"I'm not sure what you're—"

"I became a big history buff after I started having these episodes. Sometimes I still wouldn't have any idea in the world where I was. But back there in the rotunda, I saw an old man and two little girls stage a strange little scene for a trainload of soldiers going off to war. I was *there,* and I know when there were locomotives like the one I saw, what kind of uniforms those soldiers had on. I know sentimental dramatic tableaux were popular at the time of the Civil War. A man in Continental Army clothes, waving Old Glory, two girls in white frocks striking a prayerful pose. Then, when I walked over to where you were, I went someplace else, maybe someplace really ancient, Sumer, Mohenjo-Daro, I couldn't tell. It's not like people in ancient Sumer sat around thinking, Gosh, here we are, in ancient Sumer. But wherever it was, it was hot and crowded."

"Dusty. Bad smells." Now, at last, she made eye-contact with him and held it. Colbert saw two faint parallel lines appear between her eyebrows. She didn't have to say any more. He could tell what she was thinking by the way she watched him: how does he know, is he a mind-reader, is this a trick, how can he possibly know?

"There was," he started, and hesitated. He had forgotten how quickly it could fade. He could still see the trainload of soldiers, the old man, the flag, the whiteness of the frocks, and he still had a sense of the press of bodies in the market square, but everything else was gone, or suspect, everything except— "We were there. We *were* there, both of us. I even

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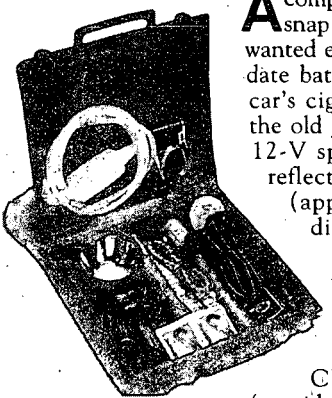

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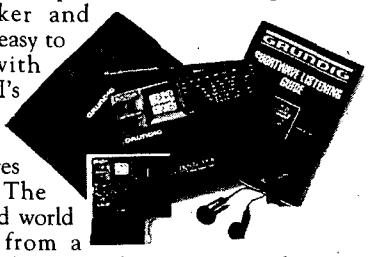

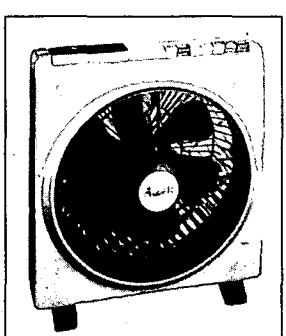

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sensed you there at the end of the first episode, and you must have sensed me. You *know* I'm not making this up."

"Please," she said, "please, I've got to get back to work."

"Please don't walk away from here without—" It clearly frightened her when he slid his hand over hers. She pulled away stiffly. He noticed then that she wore a plain gold wedding band. "Please, if this was your first time, one of your first times, then I know exactly what you're in for, I can help. If it isn't, then you know, you *know* how wonderful it is, how, how—" words failed him "—wonderful it is. Wait."

He scribbled on a card and handed it to her. She stared at it as though he were offering her a poisonous insect. He pressed it into her hand.

"Please call me any time," he said, "day or night, any time, I can help, call me."

Please, God, he thought as he watched her hurry away, please please *please,* God.

He returned to his office in the capitol basement and performed his job so distractedly throughout the afternoon that he felt duty-bound to stay late to set matters aright. The sun was low over the western hills when he emerged, the capitol grounds were relatively deserted, and Friday night was under way. As he walked to his bus stop, he saw people—couples, mostly, or couples of couples—going into Ricco's Italian Restaurant and the Rockport Cafe, coming out of the Blue Parrot and the Red Tomato, doing ordinary Friday-night things. It was like a glimpse of life on another world. When he got home, he ate his microwaved dinner and sat down with a book about the Hapsburgs. The words swam on the page.

She'll call, he told himself, not tonight, probably not tomorrow, maybe not the day after tomorrow, the wait's going to be hell, going to be even worse than the last seven years because now you have hope, sometimes hope's the most painful thing you can have, but hang in there, hang on, she will call, she will call, she has to call, has to has to *has* to.

He saw her twice more during the next week and was certain that she saw him. These were accidental sightings, however, and he made no attempt to get her to acknowledge him. Outwardly calm, he went about his business. Inwardly, he burned with the torments of the damned.

Eleven anguished evenings later, the telephone in his apartment rang. Hoping against hope, he picked it up, said hello, and heard a woman's voice. "Mister Colbert, my name is Debbie Clarkson."

He stopped breathing, his heart stopped beating, all bodily processes were suspended.

"We, uh, met," said the woman, "in the capitol rotunda."

He drew a breath. His body resumed functioning. "I'm so glad you called."

She said, "It happened again." She sounded as though she were about

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to start crying, or had already been crying. "Just flashes. It's always just flashes. For years now, just these little flashes, black-outs, whatever you call them."

"Episodes," he said. He wet his lips nervously. His heart was racing. "Let me guess how it's been for you. You've never been able to explain to anybody about what happens, what you experience."

"No. I mean, yes, that's right."

"Not your parents or teachers, not doctors or ministers. Not even—" he pictured the plain gold band on her finger "—not even your husband."

"Can't tell them," she said, "can't even tell *him,*" and now he could hear her trying hard not to cry and not entirely succeeding.

"It's okay," he said soothingly, "I understand, it's okay. People thought I was crazy. For a while, even I thought I was crazy." That wrung a great wretched sob from her. "Nobody could tell me a thing. My parents didn't know. A minister told me to pray to Jesus to cast out Satan. Doctors told me, Why, there's nothing wrong with you."

There was a sharp inhalation at her end of the line. "*Is* something wrong with me?"

"No. Not at all."

"Then what is it? What makes it happen?"

"I don't know," he said. "Sometimes I think it's this power inside. Or at least this thing, this condition, where the brain slips a cog, and there's this sudden release of energy—like in an epileptic seizure. Other times, I think it's more like an outside force I'm subject to. Like the universe is full of forces, some of which apply to everybody, others of which apply only to certain individuals. Like you and me."

"Are there others?"

"You're the only other one I've ever run into."

"Yet you sound like you've got these things worked out in your mind—"

"I've had most of my life to work things out. I started experiencing episodes when I was in my teens—little flashes like the one at the capitol. It stopped seven years ago. Somehow, I got myself skewed out of alignment with this force. Somehow, that day in the rotunda, you knocked me back into alignment."

"But what *is* it?"

"I think it's time-travel."

"I see." He knew from the sound of her voice that he had gone too far too soon, but before he could think of any way to repair the damage, she said, "It's been very interesting talking to you, Mister Colbert, goodbye," and hung up.

He stared at the telephone. She'll call back, he told himself. She has to. He didn't want to think that she had any choice. She had to call back. Had to.

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She called back twenty-seven minutes later, and the first thing she said was, "How do I know it isn't just dreaming? How do I know it isn't insanity? Maybe it is just some weird kind of epilepsy."

He was sure he heard car noises, street noises, behind her and decided that she must have left her home to make this call from a public phone. So she wasn't just calling to tell him he was crazy. "It's as real as our own lives. It's someone else's own, real life. I had episodes for twenty-five years. I realized early on that whatever this thing was, it was rare and wonderful. It made up for, for—"

Made up for so much, he wanted to say but found that he couldn't, made up for everything, dull low-paying jobs, no friendship, no love, no connection, no anything.

"Even after it stopped," he went on, "I thought I was unique. That no one could do what I'd done. Now I learn differently. Talk to me, tell me what you've experienced."

She spent the next five minutes describing an especially sustained and vivid flash of upper-class life in eighteenth-century England. She had many details wrong, and he knew that she was unconsciously supplementing her swiftly eroding memories with bits gleaned from romantic novels or movies.

Nevertheless, he was delighted, and when she had finished her account he said, "We have to get together sometime." The sound of her breathing filled the earpiece. He knew he was going fast, pushing hard, but she had to understand, he had to make her understand.

"Listen," she finally said, "I have a husband, a family. Even if I didn't, I don't know you from Adam."

"I'm not asking you to have an affair with me, just an episode. I need you to be able to have one. It happened when I came near you in the rotunda, but I can't do it by myself any more. And I *want* to do it, want it more than anything!"

"Maybe I don't want to do it."

"Want to or not," he said urgently, "you *will* do it. Listen, I'm trying to make you see how much—all history is open to you. If you could move through the past, experience it as real people actually experienced it, if you could do that just by stretching out on your back someplace and *wanting* to do it, and you'd been *able* to do it for most of your life, and then one day, suddenly, you just *couldn't do it any more—*"

"I see horrible things, terror, fire—"

"I can teach you things that might make it more pleasant. Things I had to learn on my own, I can spare you a lot of that, that terror and fire."

He waited. She did not speak for a long time. Then: "I have to get back. I told my husband I was just running out to put gas in the car."

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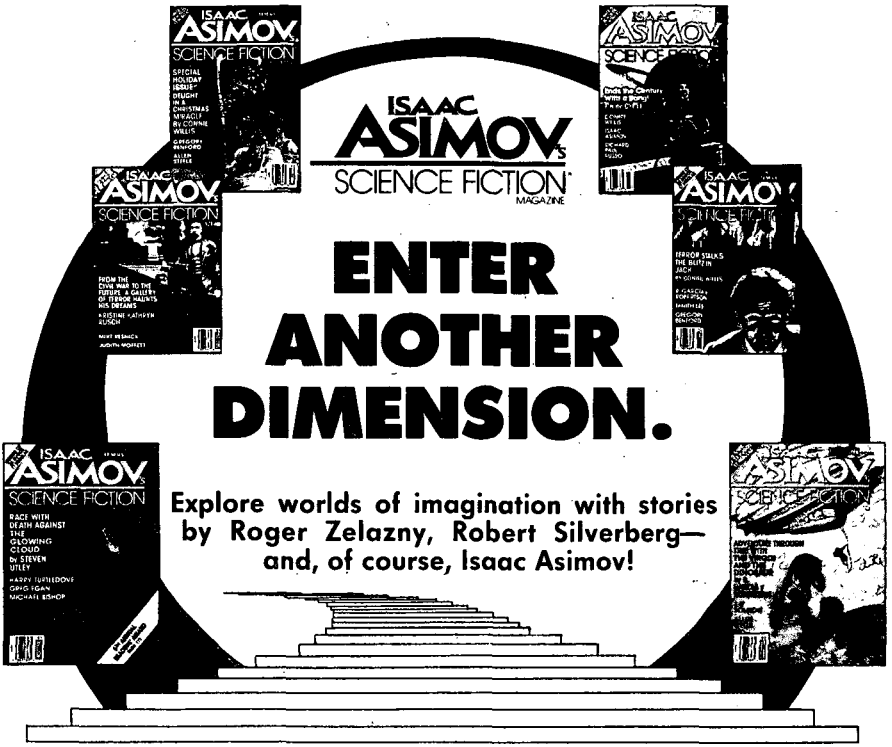
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"Please. I am begging you."

"What do I have to do?"

He looked around. He lived in a threadbare one-bedroom apartment full of books, with an occasional stray article of clothing for accent. He hadn't had a single visitor in the place since moving into it. "It'd help," he said, "if we had some quiet, private place where we could stretch out together."

"Bastard!" She slammed down the telephone at the other end.

Well, he told himself resignedly, you knew this wouldn't be easy, can't expect her to trust you right off the bat. She'll call back.

Late that same evening, however, he experienced a moment of such profound doubt that he almost broke down and wept. He had stripped off his clothes and was about to take a shower when he saw his naked form reflected in the long mirror on his closet door. He saw, not for the first time but as though for the first time, the tuft of pubic hair and the sex organs tucked half out of sight in the Y-fold of his own pink immensity. His equator was plainly marked with the imprint of the elastic band of his undershorts. He imagined what he was sure she had imagined, this blubbery planet of a man crashing into her, absorbing her blows, oozing past her clamped-together knees, forcing apart her legs, squeezing into her as relentlessly as a starfish killing a scallop.

Well, he asked himself, what did you expect her to think? Everybody knows big fat people make the best perverts.

But it wasn't a simple matter of fatness. Colbert had no sense, had never had any sense, of a thin handsome person struggling to claw his way out. There was no excellent bone structure beneath that lardy face in the mirror. He was hard put to find any bone structure at all beyond the dome of his skull and the spur that kept his nose centered between the smooth, pale jowls. He was fat to the core, fat and ugly, big fat and ugly, he had known that all his life, heard it all his life. He had been a piggy-eyed infant. There were pouches under his eyes when he was fifteen, and his hair started coming out, front and top, before he was twenty.

No matter, he thought after staring at himself for a full minute. No matter. She doesn't have to like the way I look. She doesn't even have to like me. She only has to believe that I'm the one person who understands, who can help her as this thing begins to take over her life. She will have to call back.

She did have to call back, the following night, and apologized profusely for insinuating, for implying, things she couldn't bring herself to put tongue to. He accepted in a spirit of graciousness tempered with impatience, seeming to score a few points when he confessed that he *knew* what she must have thought, and again invited her, toward the end of the conversation, to call him at any time, day or night, whenever she felt

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the need to talk. She agreed on the condition that he understand she would call only when she felt it safe to do so. Furthermore, he was never to call her. She was adamant about not letting her husband find out; she felt that she had already humiliated herself enough in her own home.

Thereafter, she called several times a week. Progress was glacially slow. He kept a tight rein on himself, avoided any further mention of time-travel, and let ten days pass before he suggested that she meet him in some public place where she could, as he put it, take his measure. She said she would think it over.

In the meantime, they began discreetly acknowledging each other, with a smile or a nod, whenever their paths crossed on the capitol grounds. He found that he didn't enjoy these encounters—they made him ache with the desire, the need, to *get on with it;* even physical lust, from what he permitted himself to remember of unhappy attempts to become a sexually-active human being, hadn't seemed so cruelly urgent—and he soon started avoiding the routes she favored. He spent his days plodding through his job and hoping she would call him at work. He spent his nights reading about New Orleans, Aztecs, the Thirteen Colonies, feudal Japan, the Ottoman Empire, Zulus, the Caribbean, Queensland, Neolithic Europe, and hoping she would call him at home. Sometimes, when he had heard nothing from her for several days, despair gnawed him as if he were carrion.

Yet progress even at a glacial pace was progress. From getting her to call him to getting her to meet him publicly to getting her to meet him privately to getting her to take off her shoes, stretch out, relax, *go,* it all seemed—albeit only in retrospect—inevitable. He had only to turn his head to see her lying on the other bed. They had not become friends, only amicable acquaintances. They still were not on a comfortable first-name basis and hadn't touched since the time in the rotunda. He would have liked to hold her hand when they went, but he knew she wasn't ready for that and knew she might never be ready. He suspected that she found him physically repulsive and doubted that she would ever cease to do so, and that kept him from telling her things he wanted very much to tell her, that without her, despair would return, that with her, he sat inside a ring of warmth and light while despair could only circle in the surrounding darkness, all hungry-eyed impotence. With her, the power within or the force without would not be denied. It would take them sometimes to tiny boats on big seas, sometimes through lives of ease and privilege, sometimes into wacky tableaux that nonetheless elicited cheers and wrung tears from grown men, soldiers at that. They had been lucky so far, but sometimes, unavoidably, despite his assurances, it was bound to take them to terror and fire, too. By then, however, he would have taught her many useful things, already he had shown her how to

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experience not mere flashes of lives but lives in their entirety. He had also suggested that she read as much history as she could, because an episode was always improved by one's knowing who, what, where, when. But she wasn't much of a reader. He also had to accept that she couldn't always be there for him. From time to time, despair's cousin dread exploited this opening and waylaid him with the obvious questions, What if she decides this is wrong, what if she decides she can't stand to look at you any more, let alone keep meeting you in cheap motel rooms, what if something terrible should happen to her. . . ?

But that was *what if,* she was here with him now, everything was okay, they had each other.

She awoke with such a start that he snapped out of his stupor. She sat up, looked at the clock, said, "Omigod, I've got to get out of here."

She slid off the bed, smoothed her rumpled clothing, chased her shoes with her feet. He watched her dig frantically through her handbag, then begin pulling at her hair with a brush.

He said, "Was it everything you expected?"

"I'm never sure what I expect. And when it's all over, I can't remember much about it." She crammed the brush back into her handbag and began touching up her makeup. "I liked the last time better. I don't remember a whole lot about it, but I do remember liking it. Isn't that strange? What's the point of enjoying anything if you always forget how much you enjoyed it?"

"While you're enjoying it, you're enjoying it. Afterward, at least you remember that you did enjoy it. It's the nature of ephemeral experiences."

She mm-hmmed as she compressed her freshly glossed lips, then said, "If you say so."

Colbert looked at her forlornly. "When can I see you again?"

She gave him a smile over her shoulder. "You need a life."

"You can't stay just a little while longer?"

She gestured around at the motel room. "How could I possibly convince my husband this isn't adultery?" She put the brush back into her handbag, looked around to make sure she wasn't forgetting anything, went to the door. As she fumbled for her car keys, she said, "I'll call you," slightly emphasizing the first and last words—unnecessarily, he felt. He knew the rules.

She left. After a few seconds, he went to the window, parted the curtains with his hand, watched her get into her car and drive away to her husband and her children. She had told him their names, but he had forgotten them. ●

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THE ASTRONAUT'S WIFE: A PROFILE

by David Lunde

"Chuck's pretty wife Virginia hails from the Paul Bunyan country of Minnesota. Being used to hard work on her father's dairy farm, it was no trick at all for her to work two jobs and help put Chuck through school at the U. of Minn. where he graduated cum laude in Physics . . .

"Chuck and Ginny and their two lovely children, Robert and Amy, live in a charming older home near Cape Kennedy, where they lead a typical suburban domestic life complete with neighborhood barbecues beside the swimming pool, whenever Chuck is not on a mission . . .

Chuck's pretty wife Virginia
left that bleak, miserable farm
and her father's sullen
incompetence
before the life in her body
could explode or freeze or both
like a Minnesota tree in winter.
She put Chuck and herself
through school, waitressing at
Perkins
and bartending at the Blue Lamp.
Once,
in her slinkiest dress, she
crossed town to the
Ambassador
and turned a hundred dollar
trick
for the missing rent. She graduated
summa cum laude in
Psychology
and didn't feel the least bit guilty.

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"When her spacefaring spouse is not at home, Ginny has learned to manage the home and children in the solid, Swedish manner of her pioneering forebears. Her tidy home provides a welcome oasis of peace and love for husband Chuck when he returns from a stressful mission on the High Frontier . . .

Chuck and Ginny and the kids
live in a ticky-tacky splitlevel
in a twenty-year-old
housing development
with leisure-suited neighbors
whose
overtures they can't always refuse,
good PR being worth the square
of its weight in budget
appropriations.
Ginny feels as if she's swimming
every time she steps outdoors
into the thick Florida air.
Bobby's asthma is
chronic. In Florida,
twenty years old *is* old, and this
compression of time
affects Ginny as well, just as
Einstein predicted. One day,
Chuck will return to find her
withered, rocking on the slumped
porch
with an unfamiliar grandchild
clenched in her bony lap.

After three afternoon gimlets,
Ginny orbits the supermarket. Past
constellations of cat food, novas
of nibbles, quasars of quenchers,
she rockets the aisles, deftly
applying her steering jets
to avoid catastrophic impact
with meteoric children, gas-giant
housewives. Bobby whines for
a Milky Way. At home, Ginny
will have to sponge up
the cake crumbs and spilled soda
from Amy's birthday party
which Chuck missed this year
again.

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"Both partners in this exceptional marriage eagerly await Chuck's next mission, the longest and most difficult to date. This is the Big One! Chuck will be helping to build America's first manned space station, which is intended to prove once and for all that man can live and work in space on a permanent basis . . .

The new nightie, for sure,
Ginny thinks,
adding porterhouse steaks
to the basket of frozen pizza,
peanut
butter, cat food, Cocoa Puffs,
and boxed mac and cheese—
the kids'
favorite. On the way home
she picks up a fancy Bordeaux
that matches her candles.
"Early fed, early to bed" jingles
in her mind as she rakes
the sand in her oasis. Man
was not meant to live and work
in Florida on a permanent basis.

"Liftoff for Chuck and the other brave astronauts is scheduled for 7:32 Monday morning. Our pride and our love will fly with them."

Liftoff is Monday morning,
but Chuck must report a day early
for the endless countdown.
Ginny thought she was
prepared
but there must have been a leak
in her inboard LOX tank,
for her guts are frozen harder
than Minnesota as she
holds him,
seeing his eyes flicker outward,
drawn to those mothlights,
the universe falling around him
like a new cloak, and her arms
so empty, empty,
even holding him
after a night of lovemaking
that said all she could say.
She smiles and cups his
unfocused face in her hands
and says, "Go, Baby,
Shake it and Bake it!"

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art: Steven Cavallo

Greg Egan's latest sales include stories to *Interzone*, *Strange Plasma*, and two Australian magazines, *Eidolon* and *Aurealis*. His first science fiction novel, *Quarantine*, will be published in the United Kingdom by Random Century sometime this fall.

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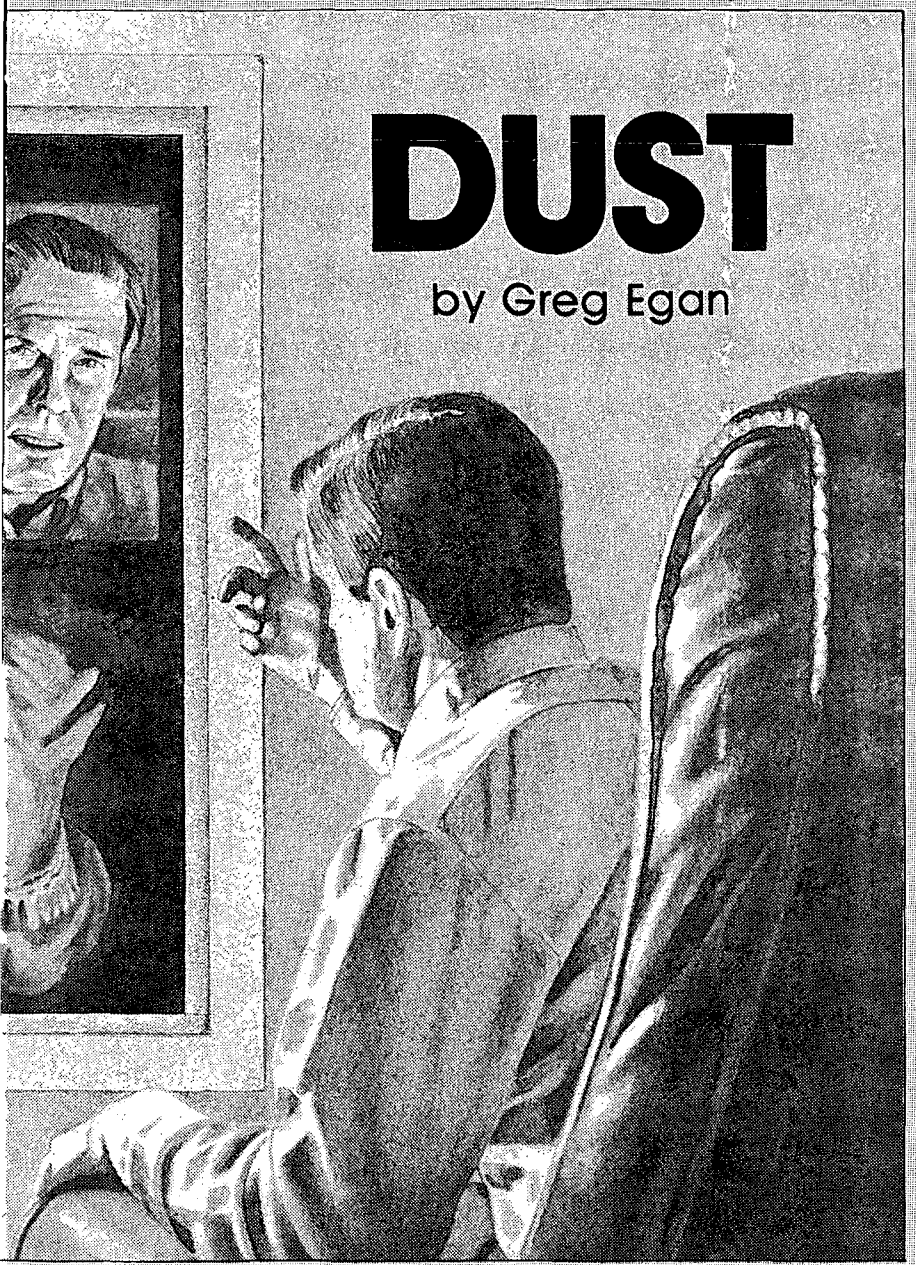
DUST

by Greg Egan



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I open my eyes, blinking at the room's unexpected brightness, then lazily reach out to place one hand in a patch of sunlight spilling onto the bed from a gap between the curtains. Dust motes drift across the shaft of light, appearing for all the world to be conjured into, and out of, existence—evoking a childhood memory of the last time I found this illusion so compelling, so hypnotic. I feel utterly refreshed—and utterly disinclined to give up my present state of comfort. I don't know why I've slept so late, and I don't care. I spread my fingers on the sun-warmed sheet, and think about drifting back to sleep.

Something's troubling me, though. A dream? I pause and try to dredge up some trace of it, without much hope; unless I'm catapulted awake by a nightmare, my dreams tend to be evanescent. And yet—

I leap out of bed, crouch down on the carpet, fists to my eyes, face against my knees, lips moving soundlessly. The shock of realization is a palpable thing: a red lesion behind my eyes, pulsing with blood. Like . . . the aftermath of a hammer blow to the thumb—and tinged with the very same mixture of surprise, anger, humiliation, and idiot bewilderment. Another childhood memory: *I held a nail to the wood, yes—but only to camouflage my true intention. I was curious about everything, including pain. I'd seen my father injure himself this way—but I knew that I needed firsthand experience to understand what he'd been through. And I was sure that it would be worth it, right up to the very last moment—*

I rock back and forth, on the verge of laughter, trying to keep my mind blank, waiting for the panic to subside. And eventually, it does—to be replaced by one simple, perfectly coherent thought: *I don't want to be here.*

For a moment, this conclusion seems unassailable, but then a countervailing voice rises up in me: *I'm not going to quit. Not again. I swore to myself that I wouldn't . . . and there are a hundred good reasons not to—*

Such as?

For a start, I can't afford it—

No? *Who* can't afford it?

I whisper, "I know *exactly* how much this cost, you bastard. And I honestly don't give a shit. *I'm not going through with it.*"

There's no reply. I clench my teeth, uncover my eyes, look around the room. Away from the few dazzling patches of direct sunshine, everything glows softly in the diffuse light: the matte-white brick walls, the imitation (imitation) mahogany desk; even the Dalí and Giger posters look harmless, domesticated. The simulation is perfect—or rather, finer-grained than my "visual" acuity, and hence indistinguishable from reality—as no doubt it was the other four times. Certainly, none of the other Copies complained about a lack of verisimilitude in their environments. In fact, they never said anything very coherent; they just ranted abuse,

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whined about their plight, and then terminated themselves—all within fifteen (subjective) minutes of gaining consciousness.

And me? What ever made me—him—think that I won't do the same? How am I different from Copy number four? Three years older. More stubborn? More determined? More desperate for success? I *was,* for sure . . . back when I was still thinking of myself as the one who'd stay real, the one who'd sit outside and watch the whole experiment from a safe distance.

Suddenly I wonder: What makes me so sure that I'm *not* outside? I laugh weakly. I don't remember anything after the scan, which is a bad sign, but I was overwrought, and I'd spent so long psyching myself up for "this" . . .

Get it over with.

I mutter the password, "Bremsstrahlung"—and my last faint hope vanishes, as a black-on-white square about a meter wide, covered in icons, appears in midair in front of me.

I give the interface window an angry thump; it resists me as if it were solid, and firmly anchored. *As if I were solid, too.* I don't really need any more convincing, but I grip the top edge and lift myself right off the floor. I regret this; the realistic cluster of effects of exertion—down to the plausible twinge in my right elbow—pin me to this "body," anchor me to this "place," in exactly the way I should be doing everything I can to avoid.

Okay. Swallow it: *I'm a Copy.* My memories may be those of a human being, but *I* will never inhabit a real body "again." Never inhabit *the real world* again . . . unless my cheapskate original scrapes up the money for a telepresence robot—in which case I could blunder around like the slowest, clumsiest, most neurologically impaired cripple. *My model-of-a-brain runs seventeen times slower than the real thing.* Yeah, sure, technology will catch up one day—and seventeen times faster for me than for him. In the meantime? I rot in this prison, jumping through hoops, carrying out his precious research—while he lives in my apartment, spends my money, sleeps with Elizabeth. . . .

I close my eyes, dizzy and confused; I lean against the cool surface of the interface.

"His" research? I'm just as curious as him, aren't I? I wanted this; I did this to myself. Nobody forced me. I knew exactly what the drawbacks would be, but I thought I'd have the strength of will (this time, at last) to transcend them, to devote myself, monklike, to the purpose for which I'd been brought into being—content in the knowledge that my other self was as unconstrained as ever.

Past tense. Yes, I made the decision—but I never really faced up to the consequences. *Arrogant, self-deluding shit.* It was only the knowledge

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that "I" would continue, free, on the outside, that gave me the "courage" to go ahead—but that's no longer true, for *me*.

Ninety-eight percent of Copies made are of the very old, and the terminally ill. People for whom it's the last resort—most of whom have spent millions beforehand, exhausting all the traditional medical options. And despite the fact that they have no other choice, 15 percent decide upon awakening—usually in a matter of hours—that they just can't hack it.

And of those who are young and healthy, those who are merely curious, those who know they have a perfectly viable, living, breathing body outside?

The bail-out rate has been, so far, one hundred percent.

I stand in the middle of the room, swearing softly for several minutes, trying to prepare myself—although I know that the longer I leave it, the harder it will become. I stare at the floating interface; its dreamlike, hallucinatory quality helps, slightly. I rarely remember my dreams, and I won't remember this one—but there's no tragedy in that, is there?

I don't want to be here.

I don't want to be *this*.

And to think I used to find it so often disappointing, waking up yet again as the *real* Paul Durham: self-centered dilettante, spoiled by a medium-sized inheritance, too wealthy to gain any sense of purpose from the ordinary human struggle to survive—but insufficiently brain-dead to devote his life to the accumulation of ever more money and power. No status-symbol luxuries for Durham: no yachts, no mansions, no bioenhancements. He indulged other urges; threw his money in another direction entirely.

And I don't know, anymore, what he thinks it's done for *him*—but I know what it's done to *me*.

I suddenly realize that I'm still stark naked. Habit—if no conceivable propriety—suggests that I should put on some clothes, but I resist the urge. One or two perfectly innocent, perfectly ordinary actions like that, and I'll find I'm taking myself seriously, thinking of myself as real.

I pace the bedroom, grasp the cool metal of the doorknob a couple of times, but manage to keep myself from turning it. *There's no point even starting to explore this world.*

I can't resist peeking out the window, though. The view of the city is flawless—every building, every cyclist, every tree, is utterly convincing—and so it should be: it's a recording, not a simulation. Essentially photographic—give or take a little computerized touching up and filling in—and totally predetermined. What's more, only a tiny part of it is "physically" accessible to me; I can see the harbor in the distance, but if I tried to go for a stroll down to the water's edge . . .

Enough. Just get it over with.

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I prod a menu icon labeled UTILITIES; it spawns another window in front of the first. The function I'm seeking is buried several menus deep—but for all that I thought I'd convinced myself that I wouldn't want to use it, I brushed up on the details just a week ago, and I know exactly where to look. For all my self-deception, for all that I tried to relate only to *the one who'd stay outside*, deep down, I must have understood full well that I had two separate futures to worry about.

I finally reach the EMERGENCIES menu, which includes a cheerful icon of a cartoon figure suspended from a parachute. *Bailing out* is what they call it—but I don't find that too cloyingly euphemistic; after all, I can't commit "suicide" when I'm not legally human. In fact, the law requires that a bail-out option be available, without reference to anything so troublesome as the "rights" of the Copy; this stipulation arises solely from the ratification of certain purely technical, international software standards.

I prod the icon; it comes to life, and recites a warning spiel. I scarcely pay attention. Then it says, "Are you absolutely sure that you wish to shut down this Copy of Paul Durham?"

Nothing to it. Program A asks Program B to confirm its request for orderly termination. Packets of data are exchanged.

"Yes, I'm sure."

A metal box, painted red, appears at my feet. I open it, take out the parachute, strap it on.

Then I close my eyes and say, "Listen, you selfish, conceited, arrogant turd: How many times do you need to be told? I'll skip the personal angst; you've heard it all before—and ignored it all before. But when are you going to stop wasting your time, your money, your energy . . . when are you going to stop wasting your *life* . . . on something which you just don't have the strength to carry through? After all the evidence to the contrary, do you honestly still believe that you're brave enough, or crazy enough, to be your own guinea pig? Well, I've got news for you: *You're not.*"

With my eyes still closed, I grip the release lever.

I'm nothing: a dream, a soon-to-be-forgotten dream.

My fingernails need cutting; they dig painfully into the skin of my palm.

Have I never, in a dream, feared the extinction of waking? Maybe I have—but a dream is not a life. If the only way I can reclaim my body, reclaim my world, is to wake and forget—

I pull the lever.

After a few seconds, I emit a constricted sob—a sound more of confusion than any kind of emotion—and open my eyes.

The lever has come away in my hand.

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I stare dumbly at this metaphor for . . . what? A bug in the termination software? Some kind of hardware glitch?

Feeling—at last—truly dreamlike, I unstrap the parachute, and unfasten the neatly packaged bundle.

Inside, there is no illusion of silk, or Kevlar, or whatever else there might plausibly have been. Just a sheet of paper. A note.

Dear Paul

The night after the scan was completed, I looked back over the whole preparatory stage of the project, and did a great deal of soul searching. And I came to the conclusion that—right up to the very last moment—my attitude was poisoned with ambivalence.

With hindsight, I very quickly came to realize just how foolish my qualms were—but that was too late for you. I couldn't afford to ditch you, and have myself scanned yet again. So, what could I do?

This: I put your awakening on hold for a while, and tracked down someone who could make a few alterations to the virtual environment utilities. I know, that wasn't strictly legal . . . but you know how important it is to me that you—that we—succeed this time.

I trust you'll understand, and I'm confident that you'll accept the situation with dignity and equanimity.

Best wishes,

Paul

I sink to my knees, still holding the note, staring at it in disbelief. *He can't have done this. He can't have been so callous.*

No? Who am I kidding? Too weak to be so cruel to anyone else—perhaps. Too weak to go through with this in person—certainly. But as for making a Copy, and then—once its future was no longer *his* future, no longer anything for *him* to fear—taking away its power to escape . . .

It rings so true that I hang my head in shame.

Then I drop the note, raise my head, and bellow with all the strength in my non-existent lungs:

"DURHAM! YOU *PRICK!*"

I think about smashing furniture. Instead, I take a long, hot shower. In part, to calm myself; in part, as an act of petty vengeance: I may not be adding to the cheapskate's water bill, but he can damn well pay for twenty virtual minutes of gratuitous hydrodynamic calculations. I scrutinize the droplets and rivulets of water on my skin, searching for

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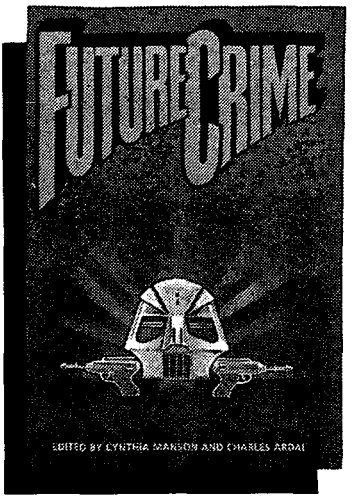

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some small but visible anomaly at the boundary between my body—computed down to subcellular resolution—and the rest of the simulation, which is modeled much more crudely. If there are any discrepancies, though, they're too subtle for me to detect.

I dress—I'm just not comfortable naked—and eat a late breakfast. The muesli tastes exactly like muesli, the toast exactly like toast, but I know there's a certain amount of cheating going on with both taste and aroma. The detailed effects of chewing, and the actions of saliva, are being faked from empirical rules, not generated from first principles; there are no individual molecules being dissolved from the food and torn apart by enzymes—just a rough set of evolving nutrient concentration values, associated with each microscopic "parcel" of saliva. Eventually, these will lead to plausible increases in the concentrations of amino acids, various carbohydrates, and other substances all the way down to humble sodium and chloride ions, in similar "parcels" of gastric juices . . . which in turn will act as input data to the models of my intestinal villus cells. From there, into the bloodstream.

The coffee makes me feel alert, but also slightly detached—as always. Neurons, of course, are modeled with the greatest care of all, and whatever receptors to caffeine and its metabolites were present on each individual neuron in my original's brain at the time of the scan, my model-of-a-brain should incorporate every one of them—in a simplified, but functionally equivalent, form.

I close my eyes and try to imagine the physical reality behind all this: a cubic meter of silent, motionless optical crystal, configured as a cluster of over a billion individual processors, one of a few hundred identical units in a basement vault . . . somewhere on the planet. I don't even know what city I'm in; the scan was made in Sydney, but the model's implementation would have been contracted out by the local node to the lowest bidder at the time.

I take a sharp vegetable knife from the kitchen drawer, and drive the point a short way into my forearm. I flick a few drops of blood onto the table—and wonder exactly which software is now responsible for the stuff. Will the blood cells "die off" slowly—or have they already been surrendered to the extrasomatic general-physics model, far too unsophisticated to represent them, let alone keep them "alive"?

If I tried to slit my wrists, when exactly would he intervene? I gaze at my distorted reflection in the blade. Maybe he'd let me die, and then run the whole model again from scratch, simply leaving out the knife. After all, I re-ran all the earlier Copies hundreds of times, tampering with various aspects of their surroundings, trying in vain to find some cheap trick that would keep them from wanting to bail out. It must be a measure of sheer stubbornness that it took me—him—so long to admit defeat and rewrite the rules.

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I put down the knife. I don't want to perform that experiment. Not yet.

I go exploring, although I don't know what I'm hoping to find. Outside my own apartment, everything is slightly less than convincing; the architecture of the building is reproduced faithfully enough, down to the ugly plastic pot-plants, but every corridor is deserted, and every door to every other apartment is sealed shut—concealing, literally, nothing. I kick one door, as hard as I can; the wood seems to give slightly, but when I examine the surface, the paint isn't even marked. The model will admit to no damage here, and the laws of physics can screw themselves.

There are people and cyclists on the street—all purely recorded. They're solid rather than ghostly, but it's an eerie kind of solidity; unstoppable, unswayable, they're like infinitely strong, infinitely disinterested robots. I hitch a ride on one frail old woman's back for a while; she carries me down the street, heedlessly. Her clothes, her skin, even her hair, all feel the same to me: hard as steel. Not cold, though. Neutral.

This street isn't meant to serve as anything but three-dimensional wallpaper; when Copies interact with each other, they often use cheap, recorded environments full of purely decorative crowds. Plazas, parks, open-air cafés; all very reassuring, no doubt, when you're fighting off a sense of isolation and claustrophobia. There are only about three thousand Copies in existence—a small population, split into even smaller, mutually antagonistic, cliques—and they can only receive realistic external visitors if they have friends or relatives willing to slow down their mental processes by a factor of seventeen. Most dutiful next-of-kin, I gather, prefer to exchange video recordings. Who wants to spend an afternoon with great-grandfather, when it burns up half a week of your life? Durham, of course, has removed all of my communications facilities; he can't have me blowing the whistle on him and ruining everything.

When I reach the corner of the block, the visual illusion of the city continues, far into the distance, but when I try to step forward onto the road, the concrete pavement under my feet starts acting like a treadmill, sliding backward at precisely the rate needed to keep me motionless, whatever pace I adopt. I back off and try leaping over this region, but my horizontal velocity dissipates—without the slightest pretense of any "physical" justification—and I land squarely in the middle of the treadmill.

The people of the recording, of course, cross the border with ease. One man walks straight at me; I stand my ground, and find myself pushed into a zone of increasing viscosity, the air around me becoming painfully unyielding before I slip free to one side. The software impeding me is, clearly, a set of clumsy patches which aims to cover every contingency—but which might not in fact be complete. The sense that discovering a way to breach this barrier would somehow "liberate" me is

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compelling—but completely irrational. Even if I did find a flaw in the program which enabled me to break through, I doubt I'd gain anything but decreasingly realistic surroundings. The recording can only contain complete information for points of view within a certain, finite zone; all there is to "escape to" is a range of coordinates where my view of the city would be full of distortions and omissions, and would eventually fade to black.

I step back from the corner, half dispirited, half amused. What did I expect to find? A big door at the edge of the model, marked EXIT, through which I could walk out into reality? Stairs leading metaphorically down to some boiler room representation of the underpinnings of this world, where I could throw a few switches and blow it all apart? Hardly. I have no right to be dissatisfied with my surroundings; they're precisely what I ordered.

It's early afternoon on a perfect spring day; I close my eyes and lift my face to the sun. Whatever I believe intellectually, there's no denying that I'm beginning to feel a purely physical sense of integrity, of identity. My skin soaks up the warmth of the sunlight. I stretch the muscles in my arms, my shoulders, my back; the sensation is perfectly ordinary, perfectly familiar—and yet I feel that I'm reaching out from the self "in my skull" to the rest of me, binding it all together, staking some kind of claim. I feel the stirrings of an erection. *Existence is beginning to seduce me.* This body doesn't want to evaporate. This body doesn't want to bail out. It doesn't much care that there's another—"more real"—version of itself elsewhere. It wants to retain its wholeness. It wants to *endure.*

And this may be a travesty of life, now—but there's always the chance of improvement. Maybe I can persuade Durham to restore my communications facilities; that would be a start. And when I get bored with holovision libraries; news systems; databases; and, if any of them deign to meet me, the ghosts of the senile rich? I could have myself suspended until processor speeds catch up with reality—when people will be able to visit without slow-down, and telepresence robots might actually be worth inhabiting.

I open my eyes, and shiver. I don't know what I want anymore—the chance to bail out, to declare this bad dream *over* . . . or the chance of virtual immortality—but I have to accept that there's only one way that I'm going to be given a choice.

I say quietly, "I won't be your guinea pig. A collaborator, yes. An equal partner. If you want cooperation, if you want meaningful data, then you're going to have to treat me like a *colleague,* not a piece of fucking apparatus. Understood?"

A window opens up in front of me. I'm shaken by the sight, not of his

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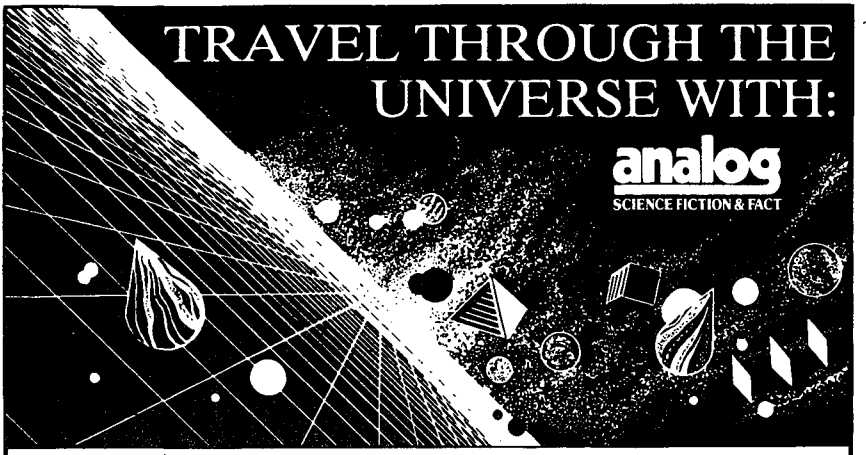

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ugly face, but of the room behind him. It's only my study—and I wandered through the virtual equivalent, disinterested, just minutes ago—but this is still my first glimpse of the real world, in real time. I move closer to the window, in the hope of seeing if there's anyone else in the room with him—*Elizabeth?*—but the image is two-dimensional, the perspective doesn't change.

He emits a brief, high-pitched squeak, then waits with visible impatience while a second, smaller window gives me a slowed-down replay.

"Of course it's understood. That was always my intention. I'm just glad you've finally come to your senses and decided to stop sulking. We can begin whenever you're ready."

I try to look at things objectively.

Every Copy is already an experiment—in perception, cognition, the nature of consciousness. A sub-cellular mathematical model of a specific human body is a spectacular feat of medical imaging and computing technology—but it's certainly not itself a human being. A lump of gallium arsenic phosphide awash with laser light is not a member of *Homo sapiens*—so a Copy manifestly isn't "human" in the current sense of the word.

The real question is: What does a Copy have *in common with* human beings? Information-theoretically? Psychologically? Metaphysically?

And from these similarities and differences, what can be revealed?

The Strong AI Hypothesis declares that consciousness is a property of certain algorithms, independent of their implementation. A computer which manipulates data in essentially the same way as an organic brain must possess essentially the same mental states.

Opponents point out that when you model a hurricane, nobody gets wet. When you model a fusion power plant, no energy is produced. When you model digestion and metabolism, no nutrients are consumed—no *real digestion* takes place. So when you model the human brain, why should you expect *real thought* to occur?

It depends, of course, on what you mean by "real thought." How do you characterize and compare the hypothetical mental states of two systems which are, physically, radically dissimilar? Pick the right parameters, and you can get whatever answer you like. If consciousness is defined purely in terms of physiological events—actual neurotransmitter molecules crossing synapses between real neurons—then those who oppose the Strong AI Hypothesis win, effortlessly. A hurricane requires real wind and actual drops of rain. If consciousness is defined, instead, in information-processing terms—*this* set of input data evokes *that* set of output data (and, perhaps, a certain kind of internal representation)—then the Strong AI Hypothesis is almost a tautology.

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Personally, I'm no longer in a position to quibble. *Cogito ergo sum.* But if I can't doubt my own consciousness, I can't expect my testimony—the output of a mere computer program—to persuade the confirmed skeptics. Even if I passionately insisted that my inherited memories of experiencing biological consciousness were qualitatively indistinguishable from my present condition, the listener would be free to treat this outburst as nothing but a computer's (eminently reasonable) prediction of what my original *would have said,* had he experienced exactly the same sensory input as my model-of-a-brain has received (and thus been tricked into believing that he was nothing but a Copy). The skeptics would say that comprehensive modeling of *mental states that might have been* does not require any "real thought" to have taken place.

Unless you *are* a Copy, the debate is unresolvable. For *me,* though —and for anyone willing to grant me the same presumption of consciousness that they grant their fellow humans—the debate is almost irrelevant. The real point is that there are questions about the nature of this condition which a Copy is infinitely better placed to explore than any human being.

I sit in my study, in my favorite armchair (although I'm not at all convinced that the texture of the surface has been accurately reproduced). Durham appears on my terminal—which is otherwise still dysfunctional. It's odd, but I'm already beginning to think of him as a bossy little *djinn* trapped inside the screen, rather than a vast, omnipotent deity striding the halls of Reality, pulling all the strings. Perhaps the pitch of his voice has something to do with it.

Squeak. Slow-motion replay: "Experiment one, trial zero. Baseline data. Time resolution one millisecond—system standard. Just count to ten, at one-second intervals, as near as you can judge it. Okay?"

I nod, irritated. I planned all this myself, I don't need step-by-step instructions. His image vanishes; during the experiments, there can't be any cues from real time.

I count. Already, I'm proving something: my subjective time, I'm sure, will differ from his by a factor very close to the ratio of model time to real time. Of course, that's been known ever since the first Copies were made—and even then, it was precisely what everyone had been expecting—but from my current perspective, I can no longer think of it as a "trivial" result.

The *djinn* returns. Staring at his face makes it harder, not easier, to believe that we have so much in common. My image of myself—to the extent that such a thing existed—was never much like my true appearance—and now, in defense of sanity, is moving even further away.

Squeak. "Okay. Experiment one, trial number one. Time resolution five milliseconds. Are you ready?"

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"Yes."

He vanishes. I count: "One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten."

Squeak. "Anything to report?"

I shrug. "No. I mean, I can't help feeling slightly apprehensive, just knowing that you're screwing around with my . . . infrastructure. But apart from that, nothing."

His eyes no longer glaze over while he's waiting for the speeded-up version of my reply; either he's gained a degree of self-discipline—or, more likely, he's interposed some smart editing software to conceal his boredom.

Squeak. "Don't worry about apprehension. We're running a control, remember?"

I'd rather not. Durham has cloned me, and he's feeding exactly the same sensorium to my clone, but he's only making changes in the model's time resolution for one of us. A perfectly reasonable thing to do—indeed, an essential part of the experiment—but it's still something I'd prefer not to dwell on.

Squeak. "Trial number two. Time resolution ten milliseconds."

I count to ten. The easiest thing in the world—when you're made of flesh, when you're made of matter, when the quarks and the electrons just do what comes naturally. I'm not built of quarks and electrons, though. I'm not even built of photons—I'm comprised of the data *represented by* the presence or absence of pulses of light, not the light itself.

A human being is embodied in a system of continuously interacting matter—ultimately, fields of fundamental particles, which seem to me incapable of being anything other than themselves. *I* am embodied in a vast set of finite, digital representations of numbers. Representations which are purely conventions. Numbers which certainly *can be* interpreted as describing aspects of a model of a human body sitting in a room . . . but it's hard to see that meaning as intrinsic, as *necessary*. Numbers whose values are recomputed—according to reasonable, but only approximately "physical," equations—for equally spaced successive values of the model's notional time.

Squeak. "Trial number three. Time resolution twenty milliseconds."

"One. Two. Three."

So, when do *I* experience existence? During the computation of these variables—or in the brief interludes when they sit in memory, unchanging, doing nothing but *representing* an instant of my life? When both stages are taking place a thousand times a subjective second, it hardly seems to matter, but very soon—

Squeak. "Trial number four. Time resolution fifty milliseconds."

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Am I the data? The process that generates it? The relationships between the numbers? *All of the above?*

"One hundred milliseconds."

I listen to my voice as I count—as if half expecting to begin to notice the encroachment of silence, to start perceiving the gaps in myself.

"Two hundred milliseconds."

A fifth of a second. "One. Two." Am I strobing in and out of existence now, at five subjective hertz? "Three. Four. Sorry, I just—" An intense wave of nausea passes through me, but I fight it down. "Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten."

The *djinn* emits a brief, solicitous squeak. "Do you want a break?"

"No. I'm fine. Go ahead." I glance around the sun-dappled room, and laugh. *What will he do if the control and the subject just gave two different replies?* I try to recall my plans for such a contingency, but I can't remember them—and I don't much care. It's *his* problem now, not mine.

Squeak. "Trial number seven. Time resolution five hundred milliseconds."

I count—and the truth is, I feel no different. A little uneasy, yes—but factoring out any metaphysical squeamishness, everything about my experience remains the same. And "of course" it does—because nothing is being omitted, in the long run. My model-of-a-brain is only being fully described at half-second (model time) intervals—but each description still includes the effects of everything that "would have happened" in between. Perhaps not quite as accurately as if the complete cycle of calculations was being carried out on a finer time scale—but that's irrelevant. Even at millisecond resolution, my models-of-neurons behave only roughly like their originals—just as any one person's neurons behave only roughly like anyone else's. Neurons aren't precision components, and they don't need to be; brains are the most fault-tolerant machines in the world.

"One thousand milliseconds."

What's more, the equations controlling the model are far too complex to solve in a single step, so in the process of calculating the solutions, vast arrays of partial results are being generated and discarded along the way. These partial results *imply*—even if they don't directly *represent*—events taking place within the gaps between successive complete descriptions. So in a sense, the intermediate states are still being described—albeit in a drastically recoded form.

"Two thousand milliseconds."

"One. *Two.* Three. *Four.*"

If I seem to speak (and hear myself speak) every number, it's because the effects of having said "three" (and having heard myself say it) are

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implicit in the details of calculating how my brain evolves from the time when I've just said "two" to the time when I've just said "four."

"Five thousand milliseconds."

"One. Two. Three. Four. *Five.*"

In any case, is it so much stranger to hear words that I've never "really" spoken, than it has been to hear *anything at all* since I woke? Millisecond sampling is far too coarse to resolve the full range of audible tones. Sound isn't represented in this world by fluctuations in air pressure values—which couldn't change fast enough—but in terms of audio power spectra: profiles of intensity versus frequency. Twenty kilohertz is just a number here, a label; nothing can actually *oscillate* at that rate. Real ears analyze pressure waves into components of various pitch; mine are fed the pre-existing power spectrum values directly, plucked out of the non-existent air by a crude patch in the model.

"Ten thousand milliseconds."

"One. Two. Three."

My sense of continuity remains as compelling as ever. Is this experience arising in retrospect from the final, complete description of my brain . . . or is it emerging from the partial calculations as they're being performed? What would happen if someone shut down the whole computer, right now?

I don't know what that *means,* though. In any terms but my own, I don't know when "right now" *is.*

"Eight. Nine. Ten."

Squeak. "How are you feeling?"

Slightly giddy—but I shrug and say, "The same as always." And basically, it's true. Aside from the unsettling effects of contemplating what might or might not have been happening to me, I can't claim to have experienced anything out of the ordinary. No altered states of consciousness, no hallucinations, no memory loss, no diminution of self-awareness, no real disorientation. "Tell me—was I the control, or the subject?"

Squeak. He grins. "I can't answer that, Paul—I'm still speaking to both of you. I'll tell you one thing, though: the two of you are still identical. There were some very small, transitory discrepancies, but they've died away completely now—and whenever the two of you were in comparable representations, all firing patterns of more than a couple of neurons were the same."

I'm curiously disappointed by this—*and my clone must be, too*—although I have no good reason to be surprised.

I say, "What did you expect? Solve the same set of equations two different ways, and of course you get the same results—give or take some minor differences in round-off errors along the way. You *must.* It's a mathematical certainty."

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Squeak. "Oh, I agree. However much we change the details of the way the model is computed, the state of the subject's brain—whenever he has one—and everything he says and does—in whatever convoluted representation—*must* match the control. Any other result would be unthinkable." He writes with his finger on the window:

$$(1 + 2) + 3 = 1 + (2 + 3)$$

I nod. "So why bother with this stage at all? *I know*—I wanted to be rigorous, I wanted to establish solid foundations. All that naive *Principia* stuff. But the truth is, it's a waste of resources. Why not skip the bleeding obvious, and get on with the kind of experiment where the answer isn't a foregone conclusion?"

Squeak. He frowns. "I didn't realize you'd grown so cynical, so quickly. AI isn't a branch of pure mathematics; it's an empirical science. Assumptions have to be tested. Confirming the so-called 'obvious' isn't such a dishonorable thing, is it? Anyway, if it's all so straightforward, what do you have to fear?"

I shake my head. "I'm not afraid; I just want to get it over with. Go ahead. Prove whatever you think you have to prove, and then we can move on."

Squeak. "That's the plan. But I think we should both get some rest now. I'll enable your communications—for incoming data only." He turns away, reaches off-screen, hits a few keys on a second terminal.

Then he turns back to me, smiling—and I know exactly what he's going to say.

Squeak. "By the way, I just deleted one of you. Couldn't afford to keep you both running, when all you're going to do is laze around."

I smile back at him, although something inside me is screaming. "Which one did you terminate?"

Squeak. "What difference does it make? I told you, they were identical. And you're still here, aren't you? Whoever you are. Whichever you *were*."

Three weeks have passed outside since the day of the scan, but it doesn't take me long to catch up with the state of the world; most of the fine details have been rendered irrelevant by subsequent events, and much of the ebb and flow has simply canceled itself out. Israel and Palestine came close to war again, over alleged water treaty violations on both sides—but a joint peace rally brought more than a million people onto the glassy plain that used to be Jerusalem, and the governments were forced to back down. Former US President Martin Sandover is still fighting extradition to Palau, to face charges arising from his role in the bloody *coup d'état* of thirty-five; the Supreme Court finally reversed a long-standing ruling which had granted him immunity from all foreign laws, and for a day or two things looked promising—but then his legal

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team apparently discovered a whole new set of delaying tactics. In Canberra, another leadership challenge has come and gone, with the Prime Minister undeposed. One journalist described this as *high drama*; I guess you had to be there. Inflation has fallen half a percent; unemployment has risen by the same amount.

I scan through the old news reports rapidly, skimming over articles and fast-forwarding scenes that I probably would have studied scrupulously, had they been "fresh." I feel a curious sense of resentment, at having "missed" so much—it's all here in front of me, *now,* but that's not the same at all.

And yet, shouldn't I be relieved that I didn't waste my time on so much ephemeral detail? The very fact that I'm now disinterested only goes to show how little of it really mattered, in the long run.

Then again, what does? People don't inhabit geological time. People inhabit hours and days; they have to care about things on that time scale.

People inhabit hours and days. *I* don't.

I plug into real time holovision, and watch a sitcom flash by in less than two minutes, the soundtrack an incomprehensible squeal. A game show. A war movie. The evening news. It's as if I'm in deep space, rushing back toward the Earth through a sea of Doppler-shifted broadcasts—and this image is strangely comforting: my situation isn't so bizarre, after all, if *real people* could find themselves in much the same relationship with the world as I am. Nobody would claim that Doppler shift or time dilation could render someone less than human.

Dusk falls over the recorded city. I eat a microwaved soya protein stew—wondering if there's any good reason now, moral or otherwise, to continue to be a vegetarian.

I listen to music until well after midnight. Tsang Chao, Michael Nyman, Philip Glass. It makes no difference that each note "really" lasts seventeen times as long as it should, or that the audio ROM sitting in the player "really" possesses no microstructure, or that the "sound" itself is being fed into my model-of-a-brain by a computerized sleight-of-hand that bears no resemblance to the ordinary process of hearing. The climax of Glass's *Mishima* still seizes me like a grappling hook through the heart.

If the computations behind *all this* were performed over millennia, by people flicking abacus beads, would I still feel exactly the same? It's outrageous to admit it—but the answer has to be *yes.*

What does that say about real time, and real space?

I lie in bed, wondering: *Do I still want to wake from this dream?* The question remains academic, though; I still don't have any choice.

* * *

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"I'd like to talk to Elizabeth."

Squeak. "That's not possible."

"Not possible? Why don't you just ask her?"

Squeak. "I can't do that, Paul. She doesn't even know you exist."

I stare at the screen. "But . . . I was going to tell her! As soon as I had a Copy who survived, I was going to tell her everything, explain everything—"

Squeak. The *djinn* says drily, "Or so we thought."

"I don't believe it! Your life's great ambition is finally being fulfilled—and you can't even share it with the one woman . . . "

Squeak. His face turns to stone. "I really don't wish to discuss this. Can we get on with the experiment, please?"

"Oh, sure. Don't let me hold things up. I almost forgot: you turned forty-five while I slept, didn't you? Many happy returns—but I'd better not waste too much time on congratulations. I don't want you dying of old age in the middle of the conversation."

Squeak. "Ah, but you're wrong. I took some short cuts while you slept—shut down ninety percent of the model, cheated on most of the rest. You got six hours' sleep in ten hours' real time. Not a bad job, I thought."

"You had no right to do that!"

Squeak. "Be practical. Ask yourself what you'd have done in my place."

"It's not a *joke!*" I can sense the streak of paranoia in my anger; I struggle to find a rational excuse. "The experiment is worthless if you're going to intervene at random. Precise, controlled changes—that's the whole point. You have to promise me you won't do it again."

Squeak. "You're the one who was complaining about waste. Someone has to think about conserving our dwindling resources."

"Promise me!"

Squeak. He shrugs. "All right. You have my word: no more ad hoc intervention."

Conserving our dwindling resources? What will he do, when he can no longer afford to keep me running? Store me until he can raise the money to start me up again, of course. In the long term, set up a trust fund; it would only have to earn enough to run me part time, at first: keep me in touch with the world, stave off excessive culture shock. Eventually, computing technology is sure to transcend the current hurdles, and once again enter a phase of plummeting costs and increasing speed.

Of course, all these reassuring plans were made by a man with two futures. *Will he really want to keep an old Copy running, when he could save his money for a death-bed scan, and "his own" immortality?* I don't know. And I may not be sure if I *want* to survive—but I wish the choice could be *mine.*

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We start the second experiment. I do my best to concentrate, although I'm angry and distracted—and very nearly convinced that my dutiful introspection is pointless. Until the model itself is changed—not just the detailed way it's computed—it remains a mathematical certainty that the subject and the control will end up with identical brains. If the subject claims to have experienced anything out of the ordinary, then *so will the control*—proving that the effect was spurious.

And yet, I still can't shrug off any of this as "trivial." Durham was right about one thing: there's no dishonor in confirming the obvious—and when it's as bizarre, as counterintuitive as this, the only way to believe it is to experience it firsthand.

This time, the model will be described at the standard resolution of one millisecond, throughout—but the order in which the states are computed will be varied.

Squeak. "Experiment two, trial number one. Reverse order."

I count, "One. Two. Three." After an initial leap into the future, I'm now traveling backward through real time. I wish I could view an external event on the terminal—some entropic cliché like a vase being smashed—and dwell on the fact that it was *me,* not the image, that was being rewound . . . but that would betray the difference between subject and control. Unless the control was shown an artificially reversed version of the same thing? Reversed how, though, if the vase was destroyed in real time? The control would have to be run separately, after the event. Ah, but even the *subject* would have to see a delayed version, because computing his real-time-first but model-time-final state would require information on all his model-time-earlier perceptions of the broken vase.

"Eight. Nine. Ten." Another imperceptible leap into the future, and the *djinn* reappears.

Squeak. "Trial number two. Odd numbered states, then even."

In external terms, I will count to ten . . . then forget having done so, and count again.

And from *my* point of view? As I count, once only, the external world—even if I can't see it—is flickering back and forth between two separate regions of time, which have been chopped up into seventeen-millisecond portions, and interleaved.

So which of us is *right?* Relativity may insist upon equal status for all reference frames . . . but the coordinate transformations it describes are smooth—possibly extreme, but always continuous. One observer's space-time can be stretched and deformed in the eyes of another—but it can't be sliced like a loaf of bread, and then shuffled like a deck of cards.

"Every tenth state, in ten sets."

If I insisted on being parochial, I'd have to claim that the outside world was now rapidly cycling through fragments of time drawn from ten

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distinct periods. The trouble is, this allegedly shuddering universe is home to all the processes that implement me, and they *must*—in some objective, absolute sense—be running smoothly, bound together in an unbroken causal flow, or I wouldn't even exist. My perspective is artificial, a contrivance relying on an underlying, continuous reality.

"Every twentieth state, in twenty sets."

Nineteen episodes of amnesia, nineteen new beginnings. How can I swallow such a convoluted explanation for ten perfectly ordinary seconds of my life?

"Every hundredth state, in one hundred sets."

I've lost any real feeling for what's happening to me. I just count.

"Pseudo-random ordering of states."

"One. Two. Three."

Now I am dust. Uncorrelated moments scattered throughout real time. Yet the pattern of my awareness remains perfectly intact: it finds itself, assembles itself from these scrambled fragments. I've been taken apart like a jigsaw puzzle—but my dissection and shuffling are transparent to me. On their *own* terms, the pieces remain connected.

How? Through the fact that every state reflects its entire model-time past? Is the jigsaw analogy wrong—am I more like the fragments of a hologram? But in each millisecond snapshot, do I recall and review all that's gone before? Of course not! In each snapshot, I *do* nothing. In the computations between them, then? Computations that drag me into the past and the future at random—wildly adding and subtracting experience, until it all cancels out in the end—or rather, all adds up to the very same effect as ten subjective seconds of continuity.

"Eight. Nine. Ten."

Squeak. "You're sweating."

"Both of me?"

Squeak. He laughs. "What do you think?"

"Do me a favor. The experiment is over. Shut down one of me—control or subject, I don't care."

Squeak. "Done."

"Now there's no need to conceal anything, is there? So run the pseudo-random effect on me again—and stay on-line. This time, *you* count to ten."

Squeak. He shakes his head. "Can't do it, Paul. Think about it: You can't be computed non-sequentially when past perceptions aren't known."

Of course; the broken vase problem all over again. I say, "Record yourself, then, and use that."

He seems to find the request amusing, but he indulges me; he even

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slows down the recording, so it lasts ten of my own seconds. I watch his blurred lips and jaws, listen to the drone of white noise.

Squeak. "Happy now?"

"You did scramble *me,* and not the recording?"

Squeak. "Of course. Your wish is my command."

"Yeah? Then do it again."

He grimaces, but obliges.

"Now, scramble *the recording.*"

It looks just the same. Of course.

"Again."

Squeak. "What's the point of all this?"

"Just do it."

I'm convinced that I'm on the verge of a profound insight—arising, not from any revelatory aberration in my mental processes, but from the "obvious," "inevitable" fact that the wildest permutations of the relationship between model time and real time leave me perfectly intact. I've accepted the near certainty of this, tacitly, for twenty years—but the experience is provocative in a way that the abstract understanding never could be.

It needs to be pushed further, though. The truth has to be shaken out of me.

"When do we move on to the next stage?"

Squeak. "Why so keen all of a sudden?"

"Nothing's changed. I just want to get it over and done with."

Squeak. "Well, lining up all the other machines is taking some delicate negotiations. The network allocation software isn't designed to accomodate whims about geography. It's a bit like going to a bank and asking to deposit some money . . . at a certain location in a particular computer's memory. Basically, people think I'm crazy."

I feel a momentary pang of empathy, recalling my own anticipation of these difficulties. *Empathy verging on identification.* I smother it, though; we're two utterly different people now, with different problems and different goals, and the stupidest thing I could do would be to forget that.

Squeak. "I could suspend you while I finalize the arrangements, save you the boredom, if that's what you want."

I have a lot to think about, and not just the implications of the last experiment. If he gets into the habit of shutting me down at every opportunity, I'll "soon" find myself faced with decisions that I'm not prepared to make.

"Thanks. But I'd rather wait."

I walk around the block a few times, to stretch my legs and switch off my mind. I can't dwell on the knowledge of what I am, every waking

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moment; if I did, I'd soon go mad. There's no doubt that the familiar streetscape helps me forget my bizarre nature, lets me take myself for granted and run on autopilot for a while.

It's hard to separate fact from rumor, but apparently even the giga-rich tend to live in relatively mundane surroundings, favoring realism over power fantasies. A few models-of-psychotics have reportedly set themselves up as dictators in opulent palaces, waited on hand and foot, but most Copies have aimed for an illusion of continuity. If you desperately want to convince yourself that you *are* the same person as your memories suggest, the worst thing to do would be to swan around a virtual antiquity (with mod cons), pretending to be Cleopatra or Ramses II.

I certainly don't believe that I "am" my original, but . . . why do I believe that I exist *at all?* What gives me my sense of identity? Continuity. Consistency. Once I would have dragged in *cause and effect*, but I'm not sure that I still can. The cause and effect that underlies me bears no resemblance whatsoever to the pattern of my experience—not now, and least of all when the software was dragging me back and forth through time. I can't deny that the computer which runs me is obeying the real-time physical laws—and I'm sure that, to a real-time observer, those laws would provide a completely satisfactory explanation for every pulse of laser light that constitutes my world, my flesh, my being. And yet . . . if it makes *no perceptible difference to me* whether I'm a biological creature, embodied in real cells built of real proteins built of real atoms built of real electrons and quarks . . . or a randomly time-scrambled set of descriptions of a crude model-of-a-brain . . . then surely *the pattern* is all, and cause and effect are irrelevant. The whole experience might just as well have arisen by chance.

Is that conceivable? Suppose an intentionally haywire computer sat for a thousand years or more, twitching from state to state in the sway of nothing but electrical noise. *Might it embody consciousness?*

In real time, the answer is: *Probably not*—the chance of any kind of coherence arising at random being so small. Real time, though, is only one possible reference frame; what about all the others? If the states the machine passed through can be re-ordered in time arbitrarily (with some states omitted—perhaps *most* omitted, if need be) then who knows what kind of elaborate order might emerge from the chaos?

Is that fatuous? As absurd, as empty, as claiming that every large-enough quantity of rock—contiguous or not—contains Michelangelo's *David,* and every warehouse full of paint and canvas contains the complete works of Rembrandt and Picasso—not in any mere latent form, awaiting some skilful forger to physically rearrange them, but *solely by virtue of the potential redefinition of the coordinates of space-time?*

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For a statue or a painting, yes, it's a hollow claim—where is the observer who perceives the paint to be in contact with the canvas, the stone figure to be suitably delineated by air?

If the pattern in question is *not* an isolated object, though, but *a self-contained world,* complete with at least one observer to join up the dots . . .

There's no doubt that it's possible. *I've done it.* I've assembled myself and my world—effortlessly—from the dust of randomly scattered states, from apparent noise in real time. Specially contrived noise, admittedly—but given enough of the real thing, there's no reason to believe that some subset of it wouldn't include patterns, embody relationships, as complex and coherent as the ones which underly me.

I return to the apartment, fighting off a sense of giddiness and unreality. *Do I still want to bail out?* No. *No!* I still wish that he'd never created me—but how can I declare that I'd happily wake and forget myself—wake and "reclaim" my life—when already I've come to an insight that he never would have reached himself?

The *djinn* looks tired and frayed; all the begging and bribery he must have been through to set this up seems to have taken its toll.

Squeak. "Experiment three, trial zero. Baseline data. All computations performed by processor cluster number four six two, Hitachi Supercomputer Facility, Tokyo."

"One. Two. Three." *Nice to know where I am, at last. Never visited Japan before.* "Four. Five. Six." *And in my own terms, I still haven't. The view out the window is Sydney, not Tokyo. Why should I defer to external descriptions?* "Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten."

Squeak. "Trial number one. Model partitioned into five hundred sections, run on five hundred processor clusters, distributed globally."

I count. *Five hundred clusters.* Five only for the crudely modeled external world; all the rest are allocated to my body—and most to the brain, of course. I lift my hand to my eyes—and the information flow that grants me motor control and sight now traverses tens of thousands of kilometers of optical cable. This introduces no perceptible delays; each part of me simply hibernates when necessary, waiting for the requisite feedback from around the world. Moderately distributed processing is one thing, but *this* is pure lunacy, computationally and economically. I must be costing at least a hundred times as much as usual—not quite five hundred, since each cluster's capacity is only being partly used—and my model-time to real-time factor must be more like fifty than seventeen.

Squeak. "Trial number two. One thousand sections, one thousand clusters."

Brain the size of a planet—and here I am, counting to ten. I recall the

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perennial—naïve and paranoid—fear that all the networked computers of the world might one day spontaneously give birth to a global hypermind—but I am, almost certainly, the first planet-sized intelligence on Earth. I don't feel much like a digital Gaia, though. I feel like an ordinary human being sitting in an ordinary armchair.

Squeak. "Trial number three. Model partitioned into fifty sections and twenty time sets, implemented on one thousand clusters."

"One. Two. Three." I try to imagine the outside world in my terms, but it's almost impossible. Not only am I scattered across the globe, but widely separated machines are simultaneously computing different moments of model-time. Is the distance from Tokyo to New York now the length of my *corpus callosum?* Has the planet been shrunk to the size of my skull—and banished from time altogether, except for the fifty points that contribute to my notion of the present?

Such a pathological transformation seems nonsensical—but in some hypothetical space traveler's eyes, the whole planet is virtually frozen in time and flat as a pancake. Relativity declares that this point of view is perfectly valid—but mine is not. Relativity permits continuous deformation, but no cutting and pasting. *Why?* Because it must allow for *cause and effect.* Influences must be localized, traveling from point to point at a finite velocity; chop up space-time and rearrange it, and the causal structure would fall apart.

What if you're an observer, though, who has no *causal structure?* A self-aware pattern appearing by chance in the random twitches of a noise machine, your time coordinate dancing back and forth through causally respectable "real time"? Why should you be declared a second-class being, with no right to see the universe your way? What fundamental difference is there between so-called cause and effect, and any other internally consistent pattern of perceptions?

Squeak. "Trial number four. Model partitioned into fifty sections; sections and states pseudo-randomly allocated to one thousand clusters."

"One. Two. Three."

I stop counting, stretch my arms wide, stand. I wheel around once, to examine the room, checking that it's still intact, complete. Then I whisper, "This is dust. *All dust.* This room, this moment, is scattered across the planet, scattered across five hundred seconds or more—*and yet it remains whole.* Don't you see what that means?"

The *djinn* reappears, frowning, but I don't give him a chance to chastise me.

"Listen! If I can assemble myself, this room—if I can construct my own coherent space-time out of nothing but scattered fragments—*then what makes you think that you're not doing the very same thing?*

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"Imagine . . . a universe completely without structure, without topology. No space, no time; just a set of random events. I'd call them 'isolated,' but that's not the right word; there's simply *no such thing as distance.* Perhaps I shouldn't even say 'random,' since that makes it sound like there's some kind of natural order in which to consider them, one by one, and find them random—but there isn't.

"What *are* these events? We'd describe them as points in space-time, and assign them coordinates—times and places—but if that's not permitted, what's left? Values of all the fundamental particle fields? Maybe even that's assuming too much. Let's just say that each event is a collection of numbers.

"Now, if the pattern that is *me* could pick itself out from the background noise of all the other events taking place on this planet . . . then why shouldn't the pattern we think of as 'the universe' assemble itself, find itself, in exactly the same way?"

The *djinn*'s expression hovers between alarm and irritation.

Squeak. "Paul . . . I don't see the point of any of this. Space-time is a construct; the *real* universe is nothing but a sea of disconnected events . . . it's all just metaphysical waffle. An unfalsifiable hypothesis. What explanatory value does it have? What difference would it make?"

"*What difference?* We perceive—we *inhabit*—one arrangement of the set of events. But why should that arrangement be *unique?* There's no reason to believe that the pattern we've found is the only coherent way of ordering the dust. There must be billions of other universes coexisting with us, made of the very same stuff—just differently arranged. If *I* can perceive events thousands of kilometers and hundreds of seconds apart to be side-by-side and simultaneous, there could be worlds, and creatures, built up from what we'd think of as points in space-time scattered all over the galaxy, all over the universe. We're one possible solution to a giant cosmic anagram . . . but it would be ludicrous to think that we're the only one."

Squeak. "So where are all the left-over letters? If this primordial alphabet soup really is random, don't you think it's highly unlikely that we could structure the whole thing?"

That throws me, but only for a moment. "We *haven't* structured the whole thing. The universe *is* random, at the quantum level. Macroscopically, the pattern seems to be perfect; microscopically, it decays into uncertainty. We've swept the residue of randomness down to the lowest level. The anagram analogy's flawed; the building blocks are more like random pixels than random letters. Given a sufficient number of random pixels, you could construct virtually any image you liked—but under close inspection, the randomness would be revealed."

Squeak. "None of this is testable. How would we ever observe a planet

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whose constituent parts were scattered across the universe? Let alone communicate with its hypothetical inhabitants? I don't doubt that what you're saying has a certain—purely mathematical—validity: grind the universe down to a fine enough level, and I'm sure the dust could be rearranged in other ways that make as much sense as the original. If these rearranged worlds are inaccessible, though, it's all angels on the heads of pins."

"How can you say that? I've *been* rearranged! I've *visited* another world!"

Squeak. "If you did, it was an artificial world; created, not discovered."

"Found a pattern, created a pattern . . . there's no real difference."

Squeak. "Paul, you know that everything you experienced was due to the way your model was programmed; there's no need to invoke *other worlds*. The state of your brain at every moment can be explained completely in terms of *this* arrangement of time and space."

"Of course! Your pattern hasn't been violated; the computers did exactly what was expected of them. That doesn't make my perspective any less valid, though. Stop thinking of explanations, causes and effects; there are only *patterns*. The scattered events that formed my experience had an internal consistency every bit as real as the consistency in the actions of the computers. And perhaps the computers didn't provide all of it."

Squeak. "What do you mean?"

"The gaps, in experiment one. What filled them in? What was I made of, when the processors weren't describing me? Well . . . it's a big universe. Plenty of dust to *be me,* in between descriptions. Plenty of events—nothing to do with your computers, maybe nothing to do with your planet or your epoch—out of which to construct ten seconds of experience, consistent with everything that had gone before—and everything yet to come."

Squeak. The *djinn* looks seriously worried now. "Paul, listen: you're a Copy in a virtual environment under computer control. Nothing more, nothing less. These experiments prove that your internal sense of space and time is invariant—as expected. But your states are *computed,* your memories *have to be* what they would have been without manipulation. You haven't visited any other worlds, you haven't built yourself out of fragments of distant galaxies."

I laugh. "Your stupidity is . . . surreal. What the fuck did you *create me for,* if you're not even going to *listen* to me? We've stumbled onto something of cosmic importance! Forget about farting around with the details of neural models; we have to devote all our resources to exploring this further. We've had a glimpse of the truth behind . . . *everything*:

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space, time, the laws of physics. You can't shrug that off by saying that my states were *inevitable*."

Squeak. "Control and subject are still identical."

I scream with exasperation. "Of *course* they are, you moron! That's the whole point! Like acceleration and gravity in General Relativity, it's the equivalent experience of two different observers that blows the old paradigm apart."

Squeak. The *djinn* mutters, dismayed, "Elizabeth said this would happen. She said it was only a matter of time before you'd lose touch."

I stare at him. "*Elizabeth?* You said you hadn't even told her!"

Squeak. "Well, I have. I didn't let you know, because I didn't think you'd want to hear her reaction."

"Which was?"

Squeak. "She wanted to shut you down. She said I was . . . seriously disturbed, to even think about doing this. She said she'd find help for me."

"Yeah? Well, what would *she* know? Ignore her!"

Squeak. He frowns apologetically, an expression I recognize from the inside, and my guts turn to ice. "Paul, maybe I should pause you, while I think things over. Elizabeth *does* care about me, more than I realized. I should talk it through with her again."

"No. Oh, shit, *no*." *He won't restart me from this point. Even if he doesn't abandon the project, he'll go back to the scan, and try something different, to keep me in line. Maybe he won't perform the first experiments at all—the ones which gave me this insight. The ones which made me who I am.*

Squeak. "Only temporarily. I promise. Trust me."

"Paul. Please."

He reaches off-screen.

"*No!*"

There's a hand gripping my forearm. I try to shake it off, but my arm barely moves, and a terrible aching starts up in my shoulder. I open my eyes, close them again in pain. I try again. On the fifth or sixth attempt, I manage to see a face through washed-out brightness and tears.

Elizabeth.

She holds a cup to my lips. I take a sip, splutter and choke, but then force some of the thin sweet liquid down.

She says, "You'll be okay soon. Just don't try to move too quickly."

"Why are you here?" I cough, shake my head, wish I hadn't. I'm touched, but confused. Why did my original lie, and claim that she wanted to shut me down, when in fact she was sympathetic enough to go through the arduous process of visiting me?

I'm lying on something like a dentist's couch, in an unfamiliar room.

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I'm in a hospital gown; there's a drip in my right arm, and a catheter in my urethra. I glance up to see an interface helmet, a bulky hemisphere of magnetic axon current inducers, suspended from a gantry, not far above my head. Fair enough, I suppose, to construct a simulated meeting place that looks like the room that her real body must be in; putting me in the couch, though, and giving me all the symptoms of a waking visitor, seems a little extreme.

I tap the couch with my left hand. "What's the point of all this? You want me to know exactly what you're going through? Okay. I'm grateful. And it's good to see you." I shudder with relief, and delayed shock. "Fantastic, to tell the truth." I laugh weakly. "I honestly thought he was going to wipe me out. The man's a complete lunatic. Believe me, you're talking to his better half."

She's perched on a stool beside me. "Paul. Try to listen carefully to what I'm going to say. You'll start to reintegrate the suppressed memories gradually, on your own, but it'll help if I talk you through it all first. To start with, you're not a Copy. You're flesh and blood."

I stare at her. "What kind of sadistic joke is that? Do you know how hard it was, how long it took me, to come to terms with the truth?"

She shakes her head. "It's not a joke. I know you don't remember yet, but after you made the scan that was going to run as Copy number five, you finally told me what you were doing. And I persuaded you not to run it—until you'd tried another experiment: putting yourself in its place. Finding out, first hand, what *it* would be forced to go through.

"And you agreed. You entered the virtual environment which the Copy would have inhabited—with your memories since the day of the scan suppressed, so you had no way of knowing that you were only a visitor."

Her face betrays no hint of deception—but software can smooth that out. "I don't believe you. How can I *be* the original? I *spoke to* the original. What am I supposed to believe? *He* was the Copy?"

She sighs, but says patiently, "Of course not. That would hardly spare the Copy any trauma, would it? The scan was never run. *I* controlled the puppet that played your 'original'—software provided the vocabulary signature and body language, but I pulled the strings."

I shake my head, and whisper, "Bremsstrahlung." No interface window appears. I grip the couch and close my eyes, then laugh. "You say I agreed to this? What kind of masochist would do that? I'm going out of my mind! *I don't know what I am!*"

She takes hold of my arm again. "Of course you're still disoriented—but trust me, it won't last long. And you *know* why you agreed. You were sick of Copies bailing out on you. One way or another, you have to come to terms with their experience. Spending a few days believing you were a Copy would make or break the project: you'd either

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end up truly prepared, at last, to give rise to a Copy who'd be able to cope with its fate—or you'd gain enough sympathy for their plight to stop creating them."

A technician comes into the room and removes my drip and catheter. I prop myself up and look out through the windows of the room's swing doors; I can see half a dozen people in the corridor. I bellow wordlessly at the top of my lungs; they all turn to stare in my direction. The technician says, mildly, "Your penis might sting for an hour or two."

I slump back onto the couch and turn to Elizabeth. "You wouldn't pay for reactive crowds. *I* wouldn't pay for reactive crowds. Looks like you're telling the truth."

People, glorious *people:* thousands of strangers, meeting my eyes with suspicion or puzzlement, stepping out of my way on the street—or, more often, clearly, consciously refusing to. I'll never feel alone in a crowd again; I remember what *true* invisibility is like.

The freedom of the city is so sweet. I walked the streets of Sydney for a full day, exploring every ugly shopping arcade, every piss-stinking litter-strewn park and alley, until, with aching feet, I squeezed my way home through the evening rush-hour, to watch the real-time news.

There is no room for doubt: I am not in a virtual environment. Nobody in the world could have reason to spend so much money, simply to deceive me.

When Elizabeth asks if my memories are back, I nod and say, of course. She doesn't grill me on the details. In fact, having gone over her story so many times in my head, I can almost imagine the stages: my qualms after the fifth scan, repeatedly putting off running the model, confessing to Elizabeth about the project, accepting her challenge to experience for myself just what my Copies were suffering.

And if the suppressed memories haven't actually integrated, well, I've checked the literature, and there's a 2.5 percent risk of that happening.

I have an account from the database service which shows that I consulted the very same articles before.

I reread and replayed the news reports that I accessed from inside; I found no discrepancies. In fact, I've been reading a great deal of history, geography, and astronomy, and although I'm surprised now and then by details that I'd never learnt before, I can't say that I've come across anything that definitely contradicts my prior understanding.

Everything is consistent. Everything is explicable.

I still can't stop wondering, though, what might happen to a Copy who's shut down, and never run again. A normal human death is one thing—woven into a much vaster tapestry, it's a process that makes perfect sense. From the internal point of view of a Copy whose model

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is simply *halted,* though, there is no explanation whatsoever for this "death"—just an edge where the pattern abruptly ends.

If a Copy could assemble itself from dust scattered across the world, and bridge the gaps in its existence with dust from across the universe, why should it ever come to an *inconsistent* end? Why shouldn't the pattern keep on finding itself? Or find, perhaps, a *larger* pattern into which it could merge?

Perhaps it's pointless to aspire to know the truth. If I *was* a Copy, and "found" this world, this arrangement of dust, then the seam will be, *must* be, flawless. For the patterns to merge, both "explanations" must be equally true. If I was a Copy, then it's also true that I was the flesh-and-blood Paul Durham, believing he was a Copy.

Once I had two futures. Now I have two pasts.

Elizabeth asked me yesterday what decision I'd reached: to abandon my life's obsession, or to forge ahead, now that I know firsthand what's involved. My answer disappointed her, and I'm not sure if I'll ever see her again.

In this world.

Today, I'm going to be scanned for the sixth time. I can't give up now. *I* can't discover the truth—but that doesn't mean that nobody *else* can. If I make a Copy, run him for a few virtual days, then terminate him abruptly . . . then *he,* at least, will know if his pattern of experience continues. Again, there will be an "explanation"; again, the "new" flesh-and-blood Paul Durham will have an extra past. Inheriting my memories, perhaps he will repeat the whole process again.

And again. And *again.* Although the seams will always be perfect, the "explanations" will necessarily grow ever more "contrived," less convincing, and the dust hypothesis will become ever more compelling.

I lie in bed in the predawn light, waiting for sunrise, staring into the future down this corridor of mirrors.

One thing nags at me. I could swear I had a dream—an elaborate fable, conveying some kind of insight—but my dreams are evanescent, and I don't expect to remember what it was. ●

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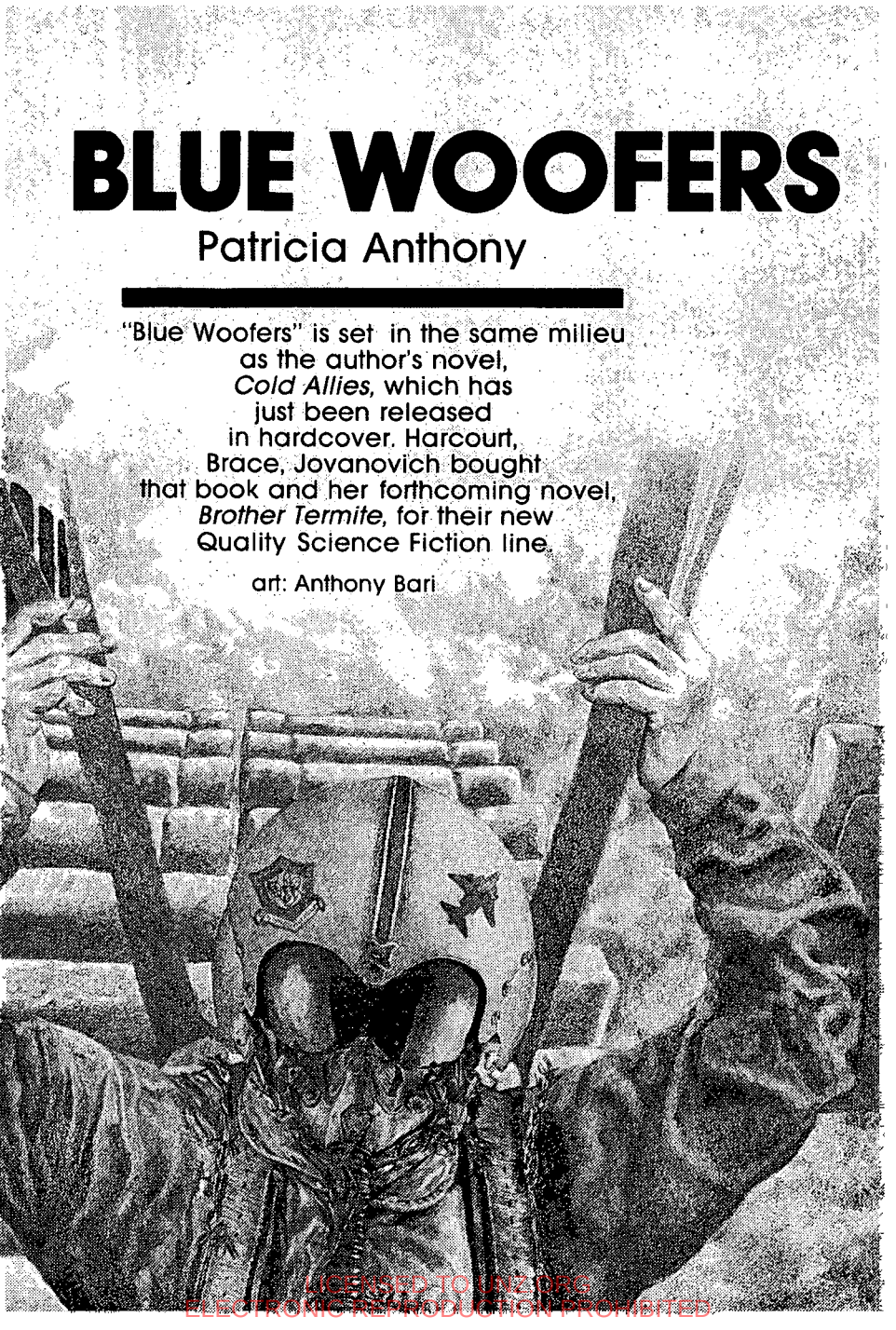
BLUE WOOFERS

Patricia Anthony

"Blue Woofers" is set in the same milieu as the author's novel, *Cold Allies,* which has just been released in hardcover. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich bought that book and her forthcoming novel, *Brother Termite,* for their new Quality Science Fiction line.

art: Anthony Bari



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The trajectory of needles in fog. Sleet falling through a dense methane atmosphere.

He snaps awake from the dream, and, disoriented, finds himself curled in a high-backed seat, a blanket rumpled about him. Except for the faint growl of the engine, the bus's interior is burdened with silence, the sort of sticky, late-night silence in which nothing moves.

Beyond the night in the window, a bloated moon coats the desert with fish-belly light. He stares out, wondering where he is. Arizona. Maybe New Mexico, he thinks. Then the rocking of the bus and the musty smell of long-enclosed and heavily air-conditioned spaces lulls him to sleep.

He shuts his eyes and dreams of the persistent tap-tap of cold fingernails against his bedroom window, a sound like the dead wanting in.

Shit, he thinks, jerking himself out of his light doze and jackknifing his body forward. It seems that he's had this dream before, and it seems that he can never quite awaken from it. His heart's doing a heavy metal rock number in his chest and his breath's coming hard and fast and painful. Panicky, he blinks into the magazine- and potato-chip-bag-littered darkness.

On the aisle near the front of the bus, an elderly man snores softly, mouth ajar, hand curled by a bent-spined paperback. Reading lights halo the heads of the sleeping passengers, as though the small group is dozing away the miracle of Pentecost.

The sight is so normal that his heart finally slows. The ache in his chest subsides. Peering over his shoulder, he is relieved to see someone else awake. His gaze locks with the girl's, and they exchange co-conspirators' smiles. The girl has brown hair and bon-bon brown eyes, and she reminds him so much of home that he is confused by the deluge of pain the nostalgia causes him.

An American girl, he thinks. As his mind forms the words, he sees her smile flicker and die.

He hears pellets of ice rattle against rocky ground, a sound so loud that he wants to cover his ears with his hands. Instead, he yanks the blanket up and shifts his gaze to the window in time to see a shooting star flash orange across the dark.

"Hello. My name's—"

He jerks his head around. The girl is sitting next to him in the neighboring seat, and for the life of him he can't remember moving over to let her sit down. But I *must* have, right? he asks himself. I just moved over and forgot about it, that's all.

Her brows furrow and then clear. "*Ann*," she says as though she has just now decided on the name, and finds her decision charming. "My name's Ann." She cocks her head. A pretty gesture for a pretty girl. "What's yours?"

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"I—" He can't remember. He can't remember his own name! "I think there's something wrong," he hisses.

The clatter of frozen rain is so intrusive, so loud, that the noise makes him forget what he was about to say. It is so thunderous that he begins to wonder if, in the morning, he will find the inside of his skull coated with ice.

Swiveling, he stares out the window again, and sees a fiery orange smudge moving through the night sky. His breath clogs in his throat like a swallowed stone.

No. He's mistaken. That burning thing. It's not a falling star at all. It's an F-14 crashing.

"Read me your book," Ann says.

Her voice startles him. He looks down at his hands and sees that he is holding a Navy manual with the words TOP SECRET emblazoned in white across the dark blue cover.

"Read it to me aloud," she tells him, leaning over intimately.

He opens the first page.

CHAPTER ONE, it says in huge sans serif type.

And under that is printed:

MAYDAY

MAYDAY

MAYDAY

With a spasm of fear, he slams the book shut. The girl is staring at him. "What's the matter?" she asks. Suddenly, her face begins sagging, the features drooping, as though the underlying meat is boneless as a snail's.

"Let me up," he gasps. He's trying to get out of his chair, but the strong clasp of the blankets is holding him down. "Let me out of here!"

There is a mushy, arctic feel to her hand. "In a moment. I want you to read me the book now."

He moans and twists, dropping the book out of his lap.

"Don't be afraid," she says. "We won't hurt you."

The bus is rolling side-to-side, like a ship on a heavy sea. Down the aisle the bus driver comes, steadying himself by the tops of the seats.

"What's the matter, boy?" he asks angrily. The bus driver is jowly and his face is running to pallid fat. The armature of his skull is nearly buried under the weight; and the boy knows that if he dared touch the driver's cheek, his hand would sink through that gummy flesh.

"Don't you want to fuck her?" the driver asks.

The fat driver, the boneless girl, have him trapped against the window. He turns to look out, to see if there is some escape.

The sight of the crashing F-14 shocks him motionless. The fighter is

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going down in the desert, falling in a quiet blaze of glory. Behind it trail dandelion fluffs blown by the wind: two parachutes.

"Take her to the back," the driver's saying. "There's empty seats in the back, and no one's looking. You can fuck her all you want. You can fuck her brains out."

He tears his gaze from the crashing plane, the drifting chutes, to look at the girl. Behind her blank eyes he can sense the chill weatherhead of her thoughts.

They are in the very back of the bus, on the long bench seat. He's using the blankets as a pillow and she's on top of him, already moaning toward climax. He's coming, too. He's coming. The bucking of his hips is frenzied. His breathing is fast. He grabs her at the bunched skirt and squeezes tight, sensing the cold sponginess of her waist underneath.

The next instant there is a throb, a spurt of release. He's climaxed, but there's no pleasure in it at all.

"I want to go home," he says, and, to his shame, begins to cry. "Can I please go home now?"

Ann, ignoring both his tears and his question, crawls off him and lowers her skirt. "Will you read me your book now?" she asks politely.

Dazed, he sits up, and notices that his zipper is undone. It seems to him that he should have been wearing his speed jeans and helmet, but they've disappeared somehow. He zips up his flight suit, while, outside the window, an F-14 is crashing in the desert and two men are 'chuting down over the twisted skeletons of burnt Arab tanks.

"My plane crashed," he whispers to her.

"What?"

"I remember now. My plane crashed."

"Read me your book," she says.

"My name is Justin Morris. Lieutenant Justin Morris. And I ejected from my F-14."

"Read me your book now, Justin."

Rage and terror explode in his belly. He shoves at her. "You captured me!"

The Arab National Army must have captured him, and have started feeding him drugs. Justin's pounding on the window now, trying to get out, and the bus driver's back, wanting to know what's happening.

"Come on, boy," the driver's saying.

Outside the window, the desert is flashing by. A burning oil field blossoms on the horizon like a night flower.

"Come on, boy. Don't you want to fuck her again?"

Ann leans over and grabs his groin. Justin elbows her hard in the chest. His arm plunges into her, dives right through her pink sweater,

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right through chill blood and putty-soft bone, until it fetches up against the bus's seat.

He starts to scream.

"Now you've gone and done it," the bus driver's saying.

He's gone and done it. God! He's gone and *done* it. There's something he should remember now, he knows, but the terrible din of the sleet batters all thought out of his brain.

"What do you want?" Ann asks. "What will make you happy?"

He grabs onto the nubby material of the seat in front of him and holds on for dear life. "Take me home! Please let me go home!" he's shouting over and over, even though somehow he knows that he'll never be allowed to go home again.

A calm voice says, "Go ahead. Call your mother."

It is suddenly very, very quiet. Justin drops his hand from his eyes. He's standing in one of those bus station rest stops, a place of fluorescent lights and bad food and formica. To his right side is a pay phone. To his front is a long bar where passengers hunch over their coffee, motionless as stuffed animals. The place smells of onions and grease.

"Call your mother," Ann says.

Justin turns to the pay phone, and realizes that there is a quarter clasped between his forefinger and his thumb. He puts the coin in and dials the old number.

"Hello, Justin," a voice in the receiver says.

The voice is female. It's not his mother's.

"Mom," he says anyway. He's not feeling much like a fighter jock any more. His confidence is no longer high, and he's so scared that his voice is cracking under the strain just like a little kid's. "Mom. Where am I?"

The woman sighs. "You're very near. Just picture home in your mind. Picture it very, very hard."

He thinks of Florida, the squat, blocky pink house. The mango tree in the front yard and the orange tree in the back. The thick, sweet, green grass and the grey thunderheads in the humid sky.

"Now they'll let you come home," the woman says kindly, "if you'll just read them the book."

He slams the receiver down on the hook and stares in horror at the phone.

Oh Jesus Christ. The Arabs have him, and he's never going to go home again. The Arabs have him by the short hairs, and all he's allowed to tell them is his name and rank and serial number, and he can only remember two thirds of that.

He glances out the plate glass window. In the night sky, an F-14 is going down in flames. The cool blue light of woofers surround the pale, wispy mushrooms of its parachutes.

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"Good thinking," a familiar voice says.

He turns to see Lieutenant Commander Harding.

"Name, rank, and serial number," the exec nods. He's dressed in his whites, and there are huge rings of sweat under his arms. It was always hard to get cool in the desert. "Tell you what, lieutenant," he tells him. "You've come through this test admirably. Let's go have a cup of coffee."

Harding puts his huge hand out and Justin takes it. The man's palm is firm and dry. Light winks off the exec's balding dome and the embossed anchors on his brass buttons.

"A test, sir?" Justin asks, afraid not to believe it.

The XO claps him on the back. "Sure, kid," he says, so gently that the concern in his voice makes Justin want to weep. "Don't you remember the test? Well, I guess the drugs are still working on you. Let's have a cup of coffee and wipe those cobwebs out."

There aren't any cobwebs in Justin's mind. There is only that scatter-shot ice, so slick that his thoughts just kind of slide off it.

He sits down on a stool next to a glass container of donuts. The waitress pushes a white cup and saucer in front of him.

Saucers. He stares at the saucer. Something nibbles and frets at his memory.

"You run into many woofers, son?" the lieutenant commander asks, taking a cautious sip from his steaming cup.

"Always run into woofers," Justin answers, dragging his eyes up from his intense scrutiny of the dish. The waitress is staring at him. Something in her cold eyes, her pulpy face, reminds him of Ann.

"Tell me your story. Everyone's got a woofer story, don't they?" Clink clink. The XO's spoon makes a musical, frosty sound against the thick sides of the cup.

"The first time Tyler, my Radar Intercept Officer, saw one in his screen, it scared the shit out of him," Justin laughs into the sudden, vacuous silence. "Then he got where he could recognize their fuzzy return and they didn't worry him any more. I've seen 'em fly off my wingtip and follow me like a dog, like they're curious or something."

"Oh?" the exec asks with a strange, flaccid smile. "Do you think they're curious?"

"I guess so, sir. They're just like big, friendly dogs." Justin's coffee is strong and hot. The sip he takes burns the roof of his mouth. "When we hit the deck, my wingman makes a joke of it. Hey, Justin, my man, he says. You got a blue woofer sniffing your tail, a woofer with a twenty-foot hard-on."

Abruptly he has the jarring thought that his wingman has been downed over fifteen minutes ago. Behind him in the pit, Tyler is screaming, "Approaching woofers!" but Justin, who's preoccupied by the missile

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they took up the port engine a minute ago, is fighting the stiffness of the stick and the crazed, bumpy-road feel of the stalling plane.

MAYDAY
MAYDAY
MAYDAY

"Eject," Justin says as he turns around, expecting to see his RIO. Lieutenant Commander Harding is there instead.

"Eject?" the exec asks pleasantly.

"We were hit," Justin says. Or were they? Or was that part of the test, too? He whirls around on his stool to stare out the plate glass window. Over the desert mountains streak the red dot-dash-dot of tracers. Chaff sparkles in the dark. From a desperate, evading plane, hot pink flares fall like garish beads from a broken necklace.

"Look into your coffee," the exec says.

Justin looks. The inside of the cup is a green radar scope, and at twelve o'clock is a tight pattern of white blips. Fuzzy bogeys.

Woofers.

"What do you think they are?" the exec asks.

Justin is sweating now. In the back of his nostrils is the ghost of a stench, the smell of burning insulation. "I don't know, sir. I just don't know."

"Look it up in your dictionary."

Justin glances down. WEBSTER'S COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY, the front of the book says. And below that is printed TOP SECRET.

It's not the words which make him remember. It's something else. Maybe the frigid blue of the executive officer's gaze, maybe the wintery chatter in Justin's own mind.

He remembers the numbers in the Heads-Up Display counting down below minimum controllable airspeed; the way the nose of the plane was struggling to dip.

Oh, he remembers. He remembers reaching down between his legs and pulling the loud handle; how the separation of the canopy unleashes a chaotic, battering wind.

He recalls the bone-jarring jerk, the way his speed jeans inflate against the G-forces. He remembers the fluttering sound of the deployed parachute above; the sight of the F-14 plummeting to the dark earth below. And, almost peripherally, he notices that some sort of light is painting him blue. His parachute is blue. His palms are blue. He realizes that there is something cold at his shoulder.

Something very, very inquisitive.

"Oh, Jesus God!" Justin screams. He lurches up from the stool and runs to the window, where an F-14 is going down in flames and a woofer is snaring its slow-falling prey.

He launches his body through the window, shattering the paper-thin

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glass. There are shouts of alarm behind. Beyond the broken window, the air doesn't have that scorched-metal smell of the central desert nor the sweat-sock, humid smell of the land near the Gulf. Instead, the atmosphere is blue and moist and January cool and suddenly Justin realizes beyond a reasonable doubt, beyond the blind faith of a fighter jock's high confidence, that there are things he's better off not knowing.

"Read me the book," Harding says.

Justin looks down in his lap and gently strokes the balding head, leaving imprints of his fingers in the skull. Clack clack. Clack, clack. The interior of the bus is dim and the sound the carriage makes against the rails is soothing.

Smiling, Justin turns the first page.

"Chapter One," he reads.

With his other hand, Justin reaches into the executive officer's unbuttoned blouse and runs his fingers along the ice castle of the breast, the hailstone of the nipple.

"Procedures on Encountering UFOs."

The words are meaningless. Justin sees them and mouths them. The book seems to please Harding, though. The exec settles down and sighs with satisfaction.

On the seats around them sit the bus driver and the waitress and Ann, their eyes huge and dark with wonder, as though Justin is telling them the most interesting story.

Justin reads.

His mind is an albatross running over the snow, taking to the air on its clumsy, wide wings. The wind catches him and boosts him into the glowering clouds, where there are no hurtful missiles, no hot flak.

He looks up momentarily from his book to smile into the freezing rain of their gazes. ●

NEXT ISSUE

John Varley returns to these pages for the first time in eight years next month with our sizzling August cover story, a big new novella called "Her Girl Friday." Varley's last story here, the famous "PRESS ENTER■," won both the Hugo and the Nebula Award in 1984, and I wouldn't be at all surprised to see *this* story on next year's award ballots as well. This is Varley at the top of his form, taking us to the Moon for a fast-paced tour through a strange and complex future Lunar society where people change sexes as casually as we change the color of our hair, and nothing is quite as it seems, and follows ace reporter Hildy Johnson as she matches wits with cults, killers, high-tech wizardry, and ruthless competitors on the trail of the biggest story of her career . . . one that could shake Lunar society to its core. Don't miss the fun and the fury, from one of SF's most imaginative and inventive writers—all right here, next month.

(Continued on page 174)

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Mike Resnick

THE LIGHT THAT BLINDS, THE CLAWS THAT CATCH

While grief and trauma may have helped form the Teddy Roosevelt we knew, happiness could have produced a vastly different man . . .

"And when my heart's dearest died, the light went from my life for ever."

—Theodore Roosevelt
In Memory of my Darling Wife (1884)

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!"

—Lewis Carroll
Through the Looking-Glass (1872)

The date is February 14, 1884.

Theodore Roosevelt holds Alice in his arms, cradling her head against his massive chest. The house is cursed, no doubt about it, and he resolves to sell it as soon as Death has claimed yet another victim.

His mother lies in her bed down the hall. She has been dead for almost eight hours. Three rooms away his two-day-old daughter wails mournfully. The doctors have done all they can for Alice, and now they sit in the parlor and wait while the twenty-six-year-old State Assembleyman spends his last few moments with his wife, tears running down his cheeks and falling onto her honey-colored hair.

The undertaker arrives for his mother, and looks into the room. He decides that perhaps he should stay, and he joins the doctors downstairs.

How can this be happening, wonders Roosevelt. Have I come this far, accomplished this much, triumphed over so many obstacles, only to lose you both on the same day?

He shakes his head furiously. *No!*, he screams silently. *I will not allow*

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it! I have looked Death in the eye before and stared him down. Draw your strength from me, for I have strength to spare!

And, miraculously, she *does* draw strength from him. Her breathing becomes more regular, and some thirty minutes later he sees her eyelids flutter. He yells for the doctors, who come up the stairs, expecting to find him holding a corpse in his arms. What they find is a semi-conscious young woman who, for no earthly reason, is fighting to live. It is touch and go for three days and three nights, but finally, on February 17, she is pronounced on the road to recovery, and for the first time in almost four days, Roosevelt sleeps.

And as he sleeps, strange images come to him in his dreams. He sees a hill in a distant, sun-baked land, and himself riding up it, pistols blazing. He sees a vast savannah, filled with more beasts than he ever knew existed. He sees a mansion, painted white. He sees many things and many events, a pageant he is unable to interpret, and then the pageant ends and he seems to see a life filled with the face and the scent and the touch of the only woman he has ever loved, and he is content.

New York is too small for him, and he longs for the wide open spaces of his beloved Dakota Bad Lands. He buys a ranch near Medora, names it Elkhorn, and moves Alice and his daughter out in the summer.

The air is too dry for Alice, the dust and pollen too much for her, and he offers to take her back to the city, but she waves his arguments away with a delicate white hand. If this is where he wants to be, she will adjust; she wants only to be a good wife to him, never a burden.

Ranching and hunting, ornithology and taxidermy, being a husband to Alice and a father to young Alice, writing a history of the West for Scribner's and a series of monographs for the scientific journals are not enough to keep him busy, and he takes on the added burden of Deputy Marshall, a sign of permanence, for he has agreed to a two-year term.

But then comes the Winter of the Blue Snow, the worst blizzard ever to hit the Bad Lands, and Alice contracts pneumonia. He tries to nurse her himself, but the condition worsens, her breathing becomes labored, the child's wet nurse threatens to leave if they remain, and finally Roosevelt puts Elkhorn up for sale and moves back to New York.

Alice recovers, slowly to be sure, but by February she is once again able to resume a social life and Roosevelt feels a great burden lifted from his shoulders. Never again will he make the mistake of forcing the vigorous outdoor life upon a frail flower that cannot be taken from its hothouse.

He sleeps, more restlessly than usual, and the images return. He is

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alone, on horseback, in the Blue Snow. The drifts are piled higher than his head, and ahead of him he can see the three desperadoes he is chasing. He has no weapons, not even a knife, but he feels confident. The guns they used to kill so many others will not work in this weather; the triggers and hammers will be frozen solid, and even if they should manage to get off a shot, the wind and the lack of visibility will protect him.

He pulls a piece of beef jerky from his pocket and chews it thoughtfully. They may have the guns, but he has the food, and within a day or two the advantage will be his. He is in no hurry. He knows where he will confront them, he knows how he will take them if they offer any resistance, he even knows the route by which he will return with them to Medora.

He studies the tracks in the snow. One of their horses is already lame, another exhausted. He dismounts, opens one of the sacks of oats he is carrying, and holds it for his own horse to eat.

There is a cave two miles ahead, large enough for both him and the horse, and if no one has found it there is a supply of firewood he laid in during his last grizzly-hunting trip.

In his dream, Roosevelt sees himself mount up again and watch the three fleeing figures. He cannot hear the words, but his lips seem to be saying: *Tomorrow you're mine. . . .*

He runs for mayor of New York in 1886, and loses—and immediately begins planning to run for Governor, but Alice cannot bear the rigors of campaigning, or the humiliation of defeat. *Please*, she begs him, *please don't give the rabble another chance to reject you.* And because he loves her, he accedes to her wishes, and loses himself in his writing. He continues working on his history of the opening of the American West, then stops after the first volume when he realizes that he will have to actually return to the frontier to gather more material if the series is to go on, and he cannot bear to be away from her. Instead, he writes the definitive treatise on taxidermy, for which he is paid a modest stipend. The book is well received by the scientific community, and Roosevelt is justifiably proud.

This dream is more disturbing than most, because his Alice is not in it. Instead an old childhood friend, Edith Carow, firm of body and bold of spirit, seems to have taken her place. They are surrounded by six children, his own daughter and five more whom he does not recognize, and live in a huge house somewhere beyond the city. Their life is idyllic. He rough-houses with both the boys and the girls, writes of the West, takes a number of governmental positions.

But there is no Alice, and eventually he wakes up, sweating profusely,

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trembling with fear. He reaches out and touches her, sighs deeply, and lies back uncomfortably on the bed. It was a frightening dream, this dream of a life without Alice, and he is afraid to go back to sleep, afraid the dream might resume.

Eventually he can no longer keep his eyes open, and he falls into a restless, dreamless sleep.

It is amazing, he thinks, staring at her: *she is almost forty, and I am still blinded by her delicate beauty, I still thrill to the sound of her laughter.*

True, he admits, she could take more of an interest in the affairs of the nation, or even in the affairs of the city in which she lives, a city that has desperately needed a good police commissioner for years (he has never told her that he was once offered the office); but it is not just her health, he knows, that is delicate—it is Alice herself, and in truth he would not have her any other way. She could read more, he acknowledges, but he enjoys reading aloud to her, and she has never objected; he sits in his easy chair every night and reads from the classics, and she sits opposite him, sewing or knitting or sometimes just watching him and smiling at him, her face aglow with the love she bears for him.

So what if she will not allow talk of this newest war in the house? Why should such a perfect creature care for war, anyway? She exists to be protected and cherished, and he will continue to dedicate his life to doing both.

He has seen this image in a dream once before, but tonight it is clearer, more defined. His men are pinned down by machine gun fire from atop a hill, and finally he climbs onto his horse and races up the hill, pistols drawn and firing. He expects to be shot out of the saddle at any instant, but miraculously he remains untouched while his own bullets hit their target again and again, and finally he is atop the hill and his men are charging up it, screaming their battle cry, while the enemy races away in defeat and confusion.

It is the most thrilling, the most triumphant moment of his life, and he wants desperately for the dream to last a little longer so that he may revel in it for just a few more minutes, but then he awakens and he is back in the city. There is a garden show to be visited tomorrow, and in the evening he would like to attend a speech on the plight of New York's immigrants. As a good citizen, he will do both.

On the way home from the theater, two drunks get into a fight and he wades in to break it up. He receives a bloody nose for his trouble, and

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Alice castigates him all the way home for getting involved in a dispute that was none of his business to begin with.

The next morning she has forgiven him, and he remarks to her that, according to what he has read in the paper, the trusts are getting out of hand. Someone should stop them, but McKinley doesn't seem to have the gumption for it.

She asks him what a trust is, and after he patiently explains it to her, he sits down, as he seems to be doing more and more often, to write a letter to the *Times*. Alice approaches him just as he is finishing it and urges him not to send it. The last time the *Times* ran one of his letters they printed his address, and while he was out she had to cope with three different radical reformers who found their way to her door to ask him to run for office again.

He is about to protest, but he looks into her delicate face and pleading eyes and realizes that even at this late date he can refuse her nothing.

It is a presumptuous dream this time. He strides through the White House with the energy of a caged lion. This morning he attacked J. P. Morgan and the trusts, this afternoon he will make peace between Russia and Japan, tonight he will send the fleet around the world, and tomorrow . . . tomorrow he will do what God Himself forgot to do and give American ships a passage through the Isthmus of Panama.

It seems to him that he has grown to be twenty feet tall, that every challenge, far from beating him down, makes him larger, and he looks forward to the next one as eagerly as a lion looks forward to its prey. It is a bully dream, just bully, and he hopes it will go on forever, but of course it doesn't.

Alice's health has begun deteriorating once again. It is the dust, the pollution, the noise, just the incredible *pace* of living in the city, a pace he has never noticed but which seems to be breaking down her body, and finally he decides they must move out to the country. He passes a house on Sagamore Hill, a house that fills him with certain vague longings, but it is far too large and far too expensive, and eventually he finds a small cottage that is suitable for their needs. It backs up to a forest, and while Alice lies in bed and tries to regain her strength, he secretly buys a rifle—she won't allow firearms in the house—and spends a happy morning hunting rabbits.

In this dream he is standing at the edge of a clearing, rifle poised and aimed, as two bull elephants charge down upon him. He drops the first one at forty yards, and though his gunbearer breaks and runs, he waits

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patiently and drops the second at ten yards. It falls so close to him that he can reach out and touch its trunk with the toe of his boot.

It has been a good day for elephant. Tomorrow he will got out after rhino.

Alice hears the gunshots and scolds him severely. He feels terribly guilty about deceiving her and vows that he will never touch a firearm again. He is in a state of utter despair until she relents—as she always relents—and forgives him.

Why, he wonders as he walks through the woods, following a small winding stream to its source, does he always disappoint her when he wants nothing more than to make her happy?

He sleeps sitting down with his back propped against a tree, and dreams not of a stream but a wild, raging river. He is on an expedition, and his leg has abscessed and he is burning with fever, and he is a thousand miles from the nearest city. Tapirs come down to drink, and through the haze of his fever he thinks he can see a jaguar approaching him. He yells at the jaguar, and sends it skulking back into the thick undergrowth. He will die someday, he knows, but it won't be here in this forsaken wilderness. Finally he takes a step, then another. The pain is excruciating, but he has borne pain before, and slowly, step by step, he begins walking along the wild Brazilian river.

When he awakens it is almost dark, and he realizes that the exploration of the winding stream will have to wait for another day, that he must hurry back to his Alice before she begins to worry.

Within a year she dies. It is not a disease or an illness, just the fading away of a fragile spirit in an even more fragile body. Roosevelt is disconsolate. He stops reading, stops walking, stops eating. Before long he, too, is on his deathbed, and he looks back on his life, the books he's written, the birds he's discovered, the taxidermy he's performed. There was a promise of something different in his youth, a hint of the outdoor life, a brief burst of political glory, but it was a road he would have had to walk alone, and he knows now, as he knew that day back when he almost lost her for the first time, that without his Alice it would have been meaningless.

No, thinks Roosevelt, *I made the right choices, I walked the right road. It hasn't been a bad or an unproductive life, some of my books will live, some of my monographs will still be read—and I was privileged to spend every moment that I could with my Alice. I am content; I would have had it no other way.*

And History weeps. ●

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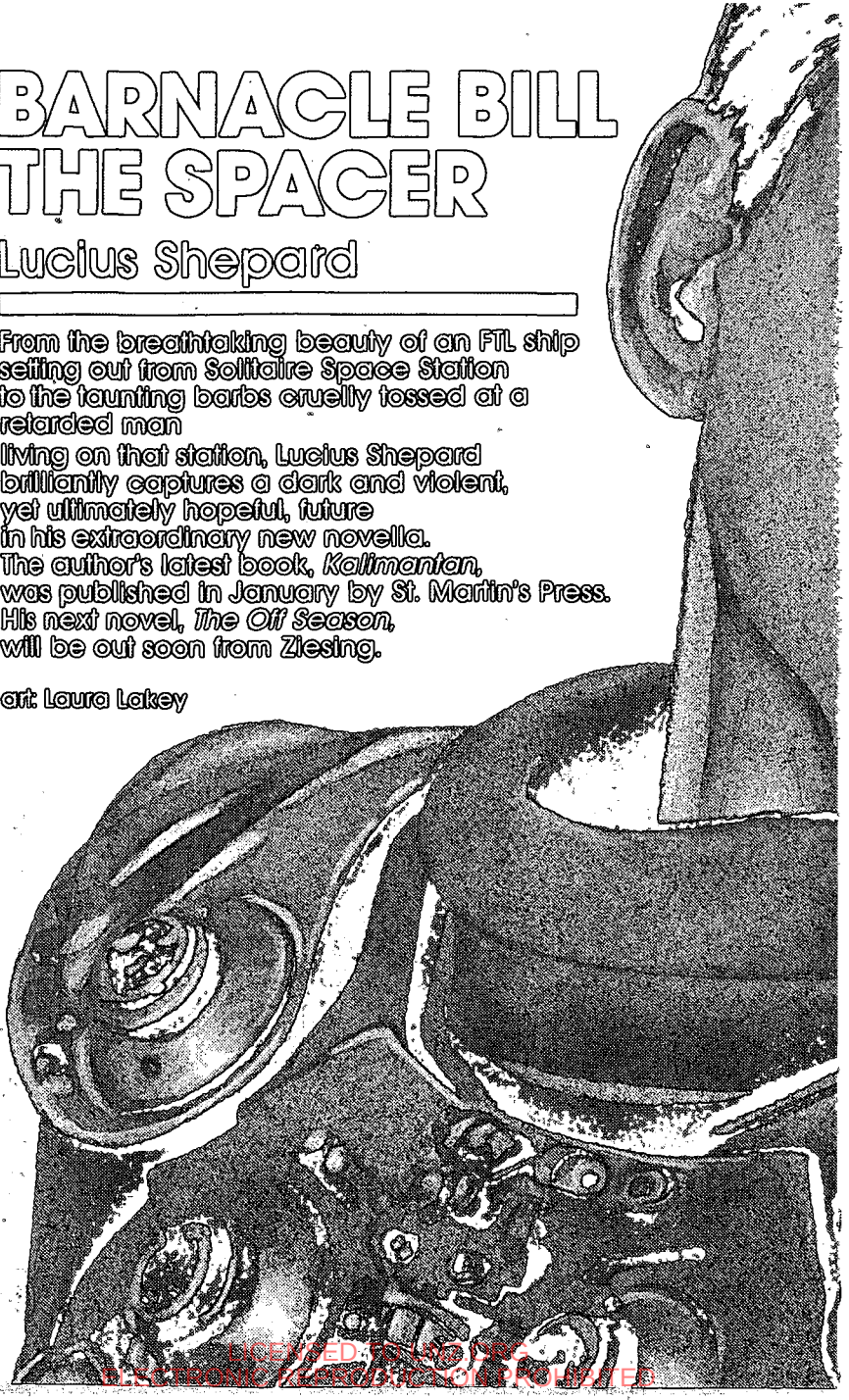
BARNACLE BILL THE SPACER

Lucius Shepard

From the breathtaking beauty of an FTL ship
setting out from Solitaire Space Station
to the taunting barbs cruelly tossed at a
retarded man
living on that station, Lucius Shepard
brilliantly captures a dark and violent,
yet ultimately hopeful, future
in his extraordinary new novella.
The author's latest book, *Kalimantan*,
was published in January by St. Martin's Press.
His next novel, *The Off Season*,
will be out soon from Ziesing.

art: Laura Lakey



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The way things happen, not the great movements of time but the ordinary things that make us what we are, the savage accidents of our births, the simple lusts that because of whimsy or a challenge to one's pride become transformed into complex tragedies of love, the heartless operations of change, the wild sweetness of other souls that intersect the orbits of our lives, travel along the same course for a while, then angle off into oblivion, leaving no formal shape for us to consider, no easily comprehensible pattern from which we may derive enlightenment . . . I often wonder why it is when stories are contrived from such materials as these, the storyteller is generally persuaded to perfume the raw stink of life, to replace bloody loss with talk of noble sacrifice, to reduce the grievous to the wistfully sad. Most people, I suppose, want their truth served with a side of sentiment; the perilous uncertainty of the world dismays them, and they wish to avoid being brought hard against it. Yet by this act of avoidance they neglect the profound sadness that can arise from a contemplation of the human spirit *in extremis* and blind themselves to beauty. That beauty, I mean, which is the iron of our existence. The beauty that enters through a wound, that whispers a black word in our ears at funerals, a word that causes us to shrug off our griever's weakness and say, No more, never again. The beauty that inspires anger, not regret, and provokes struggle, not the idle aesthetic of a beholder. That, to my mind, lies at the core of the only stories worth telling. And that is the fundamental purpose of the storyteller's art, to illumine such beauty, to declare its central importance and make it shine forth from the inevitable wreckage of our hopes and the sorry matter of our decline.

This, then, is the most beautiful story I know.

It all happened not so along ago on Solitaire Station, out beyond the orbit of Mars, where the lightships are assembled and launched, vanishing in thousand-mile-long shatterings, and it happened to a man by the name of William Stamey, otherwise known as Barnacle Bill.

Wait now, many of you are saying, I've heard that story. It's been told and retold and told again. What use could there be in repeating it?

But what have you heard, really?

That Bill was a sweet, balmy lad, I would imagine. That he was a carefree sort with a special golden spark of the Creator in his breast and the fey look of the hereafter in his eye, a friend to all who knew him. That he was touched not retarded, moonstruck and not sick at heart, ill-fated rather than violated, tormented, sinned against.

If that's the case, then you would do well to give a listen, for there were both man and boy in Bill, neither of them in the least carefree, and the things he did and how he did them are ultimately of less consequence than why he was so moved and how this reflects upon the spiritual paucity and desperation of our age.

Of all that, I would suspect, you have heard next to nothing.

Bill was thirty-two years old at the time of my story, a shambling,

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sour-smelling, unkempt fellow with a receding hairline and a daft, mooney face whose features—weak-looking blue eyes and Cupid's bow mouth and snub nose—were much too small for it, leaving the better part of a vast round area unexploited. His hands were always dirty, his station jumpsuit mapped with stains, and he was rarely without a little cloth bag in which he carried, among other items, a trove of candy and pornographic VR crystals. It was his taste for candy and pornography that frequently brought us together—the woman with whom I lived, Arlie Quires, operated the commissary outlet where Bill would go to replenish his supplies, and on occasion, when my duties with Security Section permitted, I would help Arlie out at the counter. Whenever Bill came in, he would prefer to have me wait on him; he was, you understand, intimidated by everyone he encountered, but by pretty women most of all. And Arlie, lithe and brown and clever of feature, was not only pretty but had a sharp mouth that put him off even more.

There was one instance in particular that should both serve to illustrate Bill's basic circumstance and provide a background for all that later transpired. It happened one day about six months before the return of the lightship *Perseverance*. The shift had just changed over on the assembly platforms, and the commissary bar was filled with workers. Arlie had run off somewhere, leaving me in charge, and from my vantage behind the counter, located in an ante-room whose walls were covered by a holographic photomural of a blue sky day in the now-defunct Alaskan wilderness, and furnished with metal tables and chairs, all empty at that juncture, I could see colored lights playing back and forth within the bar, and hear the insistent rhythms of a pulse group. Bill, as was his habit, peeked in from the corridor to make sure none of his enemies were about, then shuffled on in, glancing left and right, ducking his head, hunching his shoulders, the very image of a guilty party. He shoved his money-maker at me, three green telltales winking on the slim metal cylinder, signifying the amount of credit he was releasing to the commissary, and demanded in that grating, adenoidal voice of his that I give him "new stuff," meaning by this new VR crystals.

"I've nothing new for you," I told him.

"A ship came in." He gave me a look of fierce suspicion. "I saw it. I was outside, and I saw it!"

Arlie and I had been quarreling that morning, a petty difference concerning whose turn it was to use the priority lines to speak with relatives in London that had subsequently built into a major battle; I was in no mood for this sort of exchange. "Don't be an ass," I said. "You know they won't have unloaded the cargo yet."

His suspicious look flickered, but did not fade. "They unloaded already," he said. "Sleds were going back and forth." His eyes went a bit dreamy and his head wobbled, as if he were imagining himself back out on the skin of the station, watching the sleds drifting in and out of the cargo bays; but he was, I realized, fixed upon a section of the holographic mural in which a brown bear had just ambled out of the woods and was

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sniffing about a pile of branches and sapling trunks at the edge of a stream that might have been a beaver dam. Though he had never seen a real one, the notion of animals fascinated Bill, and when unable to think of anything salient to say, he would recite facts about giraffes and elephants, kangaroos and whales, and beasts even more exotic, all now receded into legend.

"Bloody hell!" I said. "Even if they've unloaded, with processing and inventory, it'll be a week or more before we see anything from it. If you want something, give me a specific order. Don't just stroll in here and say"— I tried to imitate his delivery— " 'Gimme some new stuff.' "

Two men and a woman stepped in from the corridor as I was speaking; they fell into line, keeping a good distance between themselves and Bill, and on hearing me berating him, they established eye contact with me, letting me know by their complicitors' grins that they supported my harsh response. That made me ashamed of having yelled at him.

"Look here," I said, knowing that he would never be able to manage the specific. "Shall I pick you out something? I can probably find one or two you haven't done."

He hung his great head and nodded, bullied into submissiveness. I could tell by his body language that he wanted to turn and see whether the people behind him had witnessed his humiliation, but he could not bring himself to do so. He twitched and quivered as if their stares were pricking him, and his hands gripped the edge of the counter, fingers kneading the slick surface.

By the time I returned from the stockroom several more people had filtered in from the corridor, and half-a-dozen men and women were lounging about the entrance to the bar, laughing and talking, among them Braulio Menzies, perhaps the most dedicated of Bill's tormentors, a big, balding, sallow man with sleek black hair and thick shoulders and immense forearms and a Mephistophilean salt-and-pepper goatee that lent his generous features a thoroughly menacing aspect. He had left seven children, a wife and a mother behind in São Paolo to take a position as foreman in charge of a metalworkers unit, and the better part of his wages were sent directly to his family, leaving him little to spend on entertainment; if he was drinking, and it was apparent he had been, I could think of nothing that would have moved him to this end other than news from home. As he did not look to be in a cheerful mood, chances were the news had not been good.

Hostility was thick as cheap perfume in the room. Bill was still standing with his head hung down, hands gripping the counter, but he was no longer passively maintaining that attitude—he had gone rigid, his neck was corded, his fingers squeezed the plastic, recognizing himself to be the target of every disparaging whisper and snide laugh. He seemed about to explode, he was so tightly held. Braulio stared at him with undisguised loathing, and as I set Bill's goods down on the counter, the skinny blond girl who was clinging to Braulio's arm sang, "He can't get no woman, least not one that's human, he's Barnacle Bill the Spacer."

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There was a general outburst of laughter, and Bill's face grew flushed; an ugly, broken noise issued from his throat. The girl, her smallish breasts half-spilling out from a skimpy dress of bright blue plastic, began to sing more of her cruel song.

"Oh, that's brilliant, that is!" I said. "The creative mind never ceases to amaze!" But my sarcasm had no effect upon her.

I pushed three VR crystals and a double handful of hard candy, Bill's favorite, across to him. "There you are," I said, doing my best to speak in a kindly tone, yet at the same time hoping to convey the urgency of the situation. "Don't be hanging about, now."

He gave a start. His eyelids fluttered open, and he lifted his gaze to meet mine. Anger crept into his expression, hardening the simple terrain of his face. He needed anger, I suppose, to maintain some fleeting sense of dignity, to hide from the terror growing inside him, and there was no one else whom he dared confront.

"No!" he said, swatting at the candy, scattering much of it onto the floor. "You cheated! I want more!"

"Gon' mek you a pathway, boog man!" said a gangly black man, leaning in over Bill's shoulder. "Den you best travel!" Others echoed him, and one gave Bill a push toward the corridor.

Bill's eyes were locked on mine. "You cheated me, you give me some more! You owe me more!"

"Right!" I said, my temper fraying. "I'm a thoroughly dishonest human being. I live to swindle yits like yourself." I added a few pieces of candy to his pile and made to shoo him away. Braulio came forward, swaying, his eyes none too clear.

"Let the son'beetch stay, man," he said, his voice burred with rage. "I wan' talk to heem."

I came out from behind the counter and took a stand between Braulio and Bill. My actions were not due to any affection for Bill—though I did not wish him ill, neither did I wish him well; I suppose I perceived him as less a person than an unwholesome problem. In part, I was still motivated by the residue of anger from my argument with Arlie, and of course it was my duty as an officer in the Security Section to maintain order. But I think the actual reason I came to his defense was that I was bored. We were all of us bored on Solitaire. Bored and bad-tempered and despairing, afflicted with the sort of feverish malaise that springs from a sense of futility.

"That's it," I said wearily to Braulio. "That's enough from all of you. Bugger off."

"I don't wan' hort you, John," said Braulio, weaving a bit as he tried to focus on me. "Joos' you step aside."

A couple of his co-workers came to stand beside him. Jammers with silver nubs protruding from their crewcut scalps, the tips of receivers that channeled radio waves, solar energy, any type of signal, into their various brain centers, producing a euphoric kinaesthesia. I had a philosophical bias against jamming, no doubt partially the result of some vestigial Christian reflex. The sight of them refined my annoyance.

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"You poor sods are tuned to a dark channel," I said. "No saved by the bell. Not today. No happy endings."

The jammers smiled at one another. God only knows what insane jangle was responsible for their sense of well-being. I smiled, too. Then I kicked the nearer one in the head, aiming at but missing his silver stub; I did for his friend with a smartly delivered backfist. They lay motionless, their smiles still in place. Perhaps, I thought, the jamming had turned the beating into a stroll through the park. Braulio faded a step and adopted a defensive posture. The onlookers edged away. The throb of music from the bar seemed to be giving a readout of the tension in the room.

There remained a need in me for violent release, but I was not eager to mix it with Braulio; even drunk, he would be formidable, and in any case, no matter how compelling my urge to do injury, I was required by duty to make a show of restraint.

"Violence," I said, affecting a comical lower class accent, hoping to defuse the situation. "The wine of the fucking underclass. It's like me father used to say, son, 'e'd say, when you're bereft of reason and the wife's sucked up all the cooking sherry, just amble on down to the pub and have a piss in somebody's face. There's nothing so sweetly logical as an elbow to the throat, no argument so poignant as that made by grinding somebody's teeth beneath your heel. The very cracking of bones is in itself a philosophical language. And when you've captioned someone's beezer with a nice scar, it provides them a pleasant 'omily to read each time they look in the mirror. Aristotle, Plato, Einstein. All the great minds got their start brawling in the pubs. Groin punches. Elbows to the throat. These are often a first step toward the expression of the most subtle mathematical concepts. It's a fantastic intellectual experience we're embarking upon 'ere, and I for one, ladies and gents, am exhilarated by the challenge."

Among the onlookers there was a general slackening of expression and a few titters. Braulio, however, remained focused, his eyes pinned on Bill.

"This is ridiculous," I said to him. "Come on, friend. Do me the favor and shut it down."

He shook his head, slowly, awkwardly, like a bear bothered by a bee.

"What's the point of it all, man?" I nodded at Bill. "He only wants to vanish. Why don't you let him?"

The blond girl shrilled, "Way you huffin' this bombo's shit, you two gotta be flatbackin', man!"

"I didn't catch your name, darling," I said. "Tarantula, was it? You'd do well to feed her more often, Braulio. Couple of extra flies a day ought to make her more docile."

I ignored her curses, watching Braulio's shoulders; when the right one dropped a fraction, I tried a round kick; but he ducked under it and rolled away, coming up into the fluid, swaying stance of a *capoeirista*. We circled one another, looking for an opening. The crowd cleared a space around

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us. Then someone—Bill, I think—brushed against me. Braulio started what appeared to be a cartwheel, but as he braced on one hand at the mid-point of the move, his long left leg whipped out and caught me a glancing blow on the temple. Dazed, I reeled backward, took a harder blow on the side of my neck and slammed into the counter. If he had been sober, that would have done for me; but he was slow to follow, and as he moved in, I kicked him in the liver. He doubled over, and I drove a knee into his face, then swept his legs from under him. He fell heavily, and I was on him, no longer using my techniques, but punching in a frenzy like a streetfighter, venting all my ulcerated emotions. Somebody was clawing at my neck, my face. The blond girl. She was screaming, sobbing, saying, "No, no, stop it, you're killin' him." Then somebody else grabbed me from behind, pinned my arms, and I saw what I had wrought. Braulio's cheekbone was crushed, one eye was swollen shut, his upper lip had been smashed into a pulp.

"He's grievin', man!" The blond girl dropped to her knees beside him. "That's all he be doin'! Grievin' his little ones!" Her hands fluttered about his face. Most of the others stood expressionless, mute, as if the sight of violence had mollified their resentments.

I wrenched free of the man holding me.

"Fuckin' Security bitch!" said the blond. "All he's doin's grievin'."

"I don't give a fat damn what he was doing. There's no law says"—I labored for breath—"says he can exorcise it this way. Is there now?"

This last I addressed to those who had been watching, and though some refused to meet my eyes, from many I received nods and a grumbling assent. They cared nothing about my fate or Braulio's; they had been willing to witness whatever end we might have reached. But now I understood that something had happened to Braulio's children, and I understood too why he had chosen Bill to stand in for those who were truly culpable, and I felt sore in my heart for what I had done.

"Take him to the infirmary," I said, and then gestured at the jammers, who were still down, eyes closed, their smiles in place. "Them, too." I put a hand to my neck; a lump had materialized underneath my right ear and was throbbing away nicely.

Bill moved up beside me, clutching his little cloth sack. His smell and his softness and his witling ways, every facet of his being annoyed me. I think he was about to say something, but I had no wish to hear it; I saw in him then what Braulio must have seen: a pudgy monstrosity, a uselessness with two legs.

"Get out of here!" I said, disgusted with myself for having interceded on his behalf. "Go back to your goddamn crawl and stay there."

His shoulders hitched as if he were expecting a blow, and he started pushing his way through the press at the door. Just before he went off along the corridor, he turned back. I believe he may have still wanted to say something, perhaps to offer thanks or—just as likely—to drive home the point that he was dissatisfied with the quantity of his goods. In his face was a mixture of petulant defiance and fear, but that gave me no

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clue to his intent. It was his usual expression, one that had been thirty-two years in the making, for due to his peculiar history, he had every cause to be defiant and afraid.

Bill's mother had been a medical technician assigned to the station by the Seguin Corporation, which owned the development contract for the lightship program, and so, when his pre-natal scan displayed evidence of severe retardation, she was able to use her position to alter computer records in order to disguise his condition; otherwise, by station law—in effect, the law of the corporation—the foetus would have been aborted. Why she did this, and why she then committed suicide seventeen months after Bill's birth, remain a mystery, though it is assumed that her irrational actions revolved around the probability that Bill's father, a colonist aboard the lightship *Perseverence,* would never more be returning.

The discovery that Bill was retarded incited a fierce controversy. A considerable plurality of the station's work force insisted that the infant be executed, claiming that since living space was at a premium, to allow this worthless creature to survive would be an affront to all those who had made great personal sacrifices in order to come to Solitaire. This group consisted in the main of those whose lives had been shaped by or whose duty it was to uphold the quota system: childless women and administrators and—the largest element of the plurality and of the population in general—people who, like Braulio, had won a job aboard the station and thus succeeded in escaping the crushing poverty and pollution of Earth, but who had not been sufficiently important to have their families sent along, and so had been forced to abandon them. In opposition stood a vocal minority comprised of those whose religious or philosophical bias would not permit such a callous act of violence; but this was, I believe, a stance founded almost entirely on principle, and I doubt that many of those involved were enthusiastic about Bill in the specific. Standing apart from the fray was a sizeable group who, for various social and political reasons, maintained neutrality; yet I would guess that at least half of them would, if asked, have expressed their distaste for the prospect of Bill's continued existence. Fistfights and shouting matches soon became the order of the day. Meetings were held; demands made; ultimatums presented. Finally, though, it was not politics or threats of force or calls to reason that settled the issue, but rather a corporate decision.

Among Seguin's enormous holdings was a company that supplied evolved animals to various industries and government agencies, where they were utilized in environments that had been deemed too stressful or physically challenging for human workers. The difficulty with such animals lay in maintaining control over them—the new nanotechnologies were considered untrustworthy and too expensive, and computer implants, though serviceable, inevitably failed. There were a number of ongoing research programs whose aim it was to perfect the implants, and thus Seguin, seeing an opportunity for a rigorous test, not to mention

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a minor public relations coup that would speak to the deeply humane concerns of the corporation, decided—in a reversal of traditional scientific methodology—to test on Bill a new implant that would eventually be used to govern the behavior of chimpanzees and dogs and the like.

The implant, a disc of black alloy about the size of a soy wafer, contained a personality designed to entertain and jolly and converse with its host; it was embedded just beneath the skin behind the ear, and it monitored emotional levels, stimulating appropriate activity by means of electrical charges capable of bestowing both pleasure and pain. According to Bill, his implant was named Mister C, and it was—also according to Bill—his best friend, this despite the fact that it would hurt him whenever he was slow to obey its commands. I could always tell when Mister C was talking to him. His face would empty, and his eyes dart about as if trying to see the person who was speaking, and his hands would clench and unclench. Not a pleasant thing to watch. Still I suppose that Mister C was, indeed, the closest thing Bill had to a friend. Certainly it was attentive to him and was never too busy to hold a conversation; more importantly, it enabled him to perform the menial chores that had been set him: janitorial duties, fetch and carry, and, once he had reached the age of fifteen, the job that eventually earned him the name Barnacle Bill. But none of this assuaged the ill feeling toward him that prevailed throughout the station, a sentiment that grew more pronounced following the incident with Braulio. Two of Braulio's sons had been killed by a death squad who had mistaken them for members of a gang, and this tragedy caused people to begin talking about what an injustice it was that Bill should have so privileged an existence while others more worthy should be condemned to hell on Earth. Before long, the question of Bill's status was raised once again, and the issue was seized upon by Menckyn Samuelson, one of Solitaire's leading lights and—to my shame, because he was such a germ—a fellow Londoner. Samuelson had emigrated to the station as a low temperature physicist and since had insinuated himself into a position of importance in the administration. I did not understand what he stood to gain from hounding Bill—he had, I assumed, some hidden political agenda—but he flogged the matter at every opportunity to whomever would listen and succeeded in stirring up a fiercely negative reaction toward Bill. Opinion came to be almost equally divided between the options of executing him, officially or otherwise, and shipping him back to an asylum on Earth, which—as everyone knew—was only a slower and more expensive form of the first option.

There was a second development resulting from my fight with Braulio, one that had a poignant effect on my personal life, this being that Bill and I began spending a good deal of time together.

It seemed the old Chinese proverb had come into play, the one that states if you save somebody's life you become responsible for them. I had not saved his life, perhaps, but I had certainly spared him grievous injury; thus he came to view me as his protector, and I . . . well, initially I had no desire to be either his protector or his apologist, but I was forced

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to adopt both these roles. Bill was terrified. Everywhere he went he was cursed or cuffed or ill-treated in some fashion, a drastic escalation of the abuse he had always suffered. And then there was the blond girl's song: "Barnacle Bill the Spacer." Scarcely a day passed when I did not hear a new verse or two. Everyone was writing them. Whenever Bill passed in a corridor or entered a room people would start to sing. It harrowed him from place to place, that song. He woke to it and fell asleep to it, and whatever self-esteem he had possessed was soon reduced to ashes.

When he first began hanging about me, dogging me on my rounds, I tried to put him off, but I could not manage it. I held myself partly to blame for the escalation of feeling against him; if I had not been so vicious in my handling of Braulio, I thought, Bill might not have come to this pass. But there was another, more significant reason behind my tolerance. I had, it appeared, developed a conscience. Or at least so I chose to interpret my growing concern for him. I have had cause to wonder if those protective feelings that emerged from some corner of my spirit were not merely a form of perversity, if I were using my relationship with Bill to demonstrate to the rest of the station that I had more power than most, that I could walk a contrary path without fear of retribution; but I remain convinced that the compassion I came to feel toward him was the product of a renewal of the ideals I had learned in the safe harbor of my family's home back in Chelsea, conceptions of personal honor and trust and responsibility that I had long believed to be as extinct as the tiger and the dove. It may be there was a premonitory force at work in me, for it occurs to me now that the rebirth of my personal hopes was the harbinger of a more general rebirth; and yet because of all that has happened, because of how my hopes were served, I have also had reason to doubt the validity of every hope, every renewal, and to consider whether the rebirth of hope is truly possible for such diffuse, heartless, and unruly creatures as ourselves.

One day, returning from my rounds with Bill shuffling along at my shoulder, I found a black crescent moon with a red star tipping its lower horn painted on the door of Bill's quarters: the symbol used by the Strange Magnificence, the most prominent of the gang religions flourishing back on Earth, to mark their intended victims. I doubt that Bill was aware of its significance. Yet he seemed to know instinctively the symbol was a threat, and no ordinary one at that. He clung to my arm, begging me to stay with him, and when I told him I had to leave, he threw a tantrum, rolling about on the floor, whimpering, leaking tears, wailing that bad things were going to happen. I assured him that I would have no trouble in determining who had painted the symbol; I could not believe that there were more than a handful of people on Solitaire with ties to the Magnificence. But this did nothing to soothe him. Finally, though I realized it might be a mistake, I told him he could spend the night in my quarters.

"Just this once," I said. "And you'd better keep damn quiet, or you'll be out on your bum."

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He nodded, beaming at me, shifting his feet, atremble with eagerness. Had he a tail he would have wagged it. But by the time we reached my quarters, his mood had been disrupted by the dozens of stares and curses directed his way. He sat on a cushion, rocking back and forth, making a keening noise, completely unmindful of the decor, which had knocked me back a pace on opening the door. Arlie was apparently in a less than sunny mood herself, for she had slotted in a holographic interior of dark greens and browns, with heavy chairs and a sofa and tables whose wood had been worked into dragons' heads and clawed feet and such; the walls were adorned with brass light fixtures shaped like bestial masks with glowing eyes, and the rear of the room had been transformed into a receding perspective of sequentially smaller, square segments of black delineated by white lines, like a geometric tunnel into nowhere, still leading, I trusted, to something resembling a bedroom. The overall atmosphere was one of derangement, of a cramped magical lair through whose rear wall a hole had been punched into some negative dimension. Given this, I doubted that she would look kindly upon Bill's presence, but when she appeared in the far reaches of the tunnel—her chestnut hair done up, wearing a white Grecian-style robe, walking through an infinite black depth, looking minute at first, then growing larger by half with each successive segment she entered—she favored him with a cursory nod and turned her attention to me.

" 'Ave you eaten?" she asked, and before I could answer she told me she wasn't hungry, there were some sandwiches, or I could do for myself, whatever I wanted, all in the most dispirited of tones. She was, as I have said, a pretty woman, with a feline cast of feature and sleek, muscular limbs; having too many interesting lines in her face, perhaps, to suit the prevailing standards of beauty, but sensual to a fault. Ordinarily, sexual potential surrounded her like an aura. That day, however, her face had settled into a dolorous mask, her shoulders had slumped and she seemed altogether drab.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Nuffin'."

"Nothing?" I said. "Right! You look like the Queen just died, and the place is fixed up like the death of philosophy. But everything's just bloody marvelous, right?"

"Do you mind?" she snapped. "It's personal!"

"Personal, is it? Well, excuse me. I certainly wouldn't want to be getting *personal* with you. What the hell's the matter? You been struck by the monthlies?"

She pinned me with a venemous stare. "God, you're disgustin'! What is it? You 'aven't broken any 'eads today, so you've decided to bash me around a bit?"

"All right, all right," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Nao," she said. "G'wan with it. Oi fuckin' love it when you're masterful. Really, Oi do!" She turned and started back along the tunnel. "Oi'll

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just await your pleasure, shall Oi?" she called over her shoulder. "Oi mean, you will let me know what more Oi can do to serve?"

"Christ!" I said, watching her ass twitching beneath the white cloth, thinking that I would have to make a heartfelt act of contrition before I laid hands on it again. I knew, of course, why I had baited her. It was for the same reason that had brought on her depression, that provoked the vast majority of our aberrant behaviors. Frustration, anger, despair, all feelings that—no matter their immediate causes—in some way arose from the fact that Solitaire had proved to be an abject failure. Of the twenty-seven ships assembled and launched, three had thus far returned. Two of the ships had reported no hospitable environments found. The crew of the third ship had been unable to report anything, being every one of them dead, apparently by each others' hands.

We had gotten a late start on the colonization of space, far too late to save the home planet, and it was unclear whether the piddling colonies on Mars and Europa and in the asteroids would allow us to survive. Perhaps it should have been clear, perhaps we should have realized that despite the horror and chaos of Earth, the brush wars, the almost weekly collapse of governments, our flimsy grasp of the new technologies, despite the failure of Solitaire and everything else . . . perhaps it should have been more than clear that our species possessed a root stubbornness capable of withstanding all but the most dire of cataclysms, and that eventually our colonies would thrive. But they would never be able to absorb the desperate population of Earth, and the knowledge that our brothers and sisters and parents were doomed to a life of diminishing expectations, to famines and wars and accidents of industry that would ultimately kill off billions, it caused those of us fortunate enough to have escaped to become dazed and badly weighted in our heads, too heavy with a sense of responsibility to comprehend the true moral requisites of our good fortune. Even if successful the lightship program would only bleed off a tiny percentage of Earth's population, and most, I assumed, would be personnel attached to the Seguin Corporation and those whom the corporation or else some corrupt government agency deemed worthy; yet we came to perceive ourselves as the common people's last, best hope, and each successive failure struck at our hearts and left us so crucially dismayed, we developed astonishing talents for self-destruction. Like neurotic Prometheans, we gnawed at our own livers and sought to despoil every happy thing that fell to us. And when we grew too enervated to practice active self-destruction, we sank into clinical depression, as Arlie was doing now.

I sat thinking of these things for a long while, watching Bill rock back and forth, now and then popping a piece of hard candy into his mouth, muttering, and I reached no new conclusions, unless an evolution of distaste for the corporation and the world and the universe could be considered new and conclusive. At length, weary of the repetitive circuit of my thoughts, I decided it was time I tried to make my peace with

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Arlie. I doubted I had the energy for prolonged apology, but I hoped that intensity would do the trick.

"You can sleep on the couch," I said to Bill, getting to my feet. "The bathroom"—I pointed off along the corridor—"is down there somewhere."

He bobbed his head, but as he kept his eyes on the floor, I could not tell if it had been a response or simply a random movement.

"Did you hear me?" I asked.

"I gotta do somethin'," he said.

"Down there." I pointed again. "The bathroom."

"They gonna kill me 'less I do somethin'."

He was not, I realized, referring to his bodily functions.

"What do you mean?"

His eyes flicked up to me, then away. " 'Less I do somethin' good, *really* good, they gonna kill me."

"Who's going to kill you?"

"The men," he said.

The men, I thought, sweet Jesus! I felt unutterably sad for him.

"I gotta find somethin'," he said with increased emphasis. "Somethin' good, somethin' makes 'em like me."

I had it now—he had seized on the notion that by some good deed or valuable service he could change people's opinion of him.

"You can't do anything, Bill. You just have to keep doing your job, and this will all wash away, I promise you."

"Mmn-mn." He shook his head vehemently like a child in denial. "I gotta find somethin' good to do."

"Look," I said. "Anything you try is very likely to backfire. Do you understand me? If you do something and you bugger it, people are going to be more angry at you than ever."

He tucked his lower lip beneath the upper and narrowed his eyes and maintained a stubborn silence.

"What does Mister C say about this?" I asked.

That was, apparently, a new thought. He blinked; the tightness left his face. "I don't know."

"Well, ask him. That's what he's there for . . . to help you with your problems."

"He doesn't always help. Sometimes he doesn't know stuff."

"Try, will you? Just give it a try."

He did not seem sure of this tactic, but after a moment he pawed at his head, running his palm along the crewcut stubble, then squeezed his eyes shut and began to mumble, long pattering phrases interrupted by pauses for breath, like a child saying his prayers as fast as he can. I guessed that he was outlining the entire situation for Mister C. After a minute his face went blank, the tip of his tongue pushed out between his lips, and I imagined the cartoonish voice—thus I had been told the implant's voice would manifest—speaking to him in rhymes, in silly patter. Then, after another few seconds, his eyes snapped open and he beamed at me.

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"Mister C says good deeds are always good," he announced proudly, obviously satisfied that he had been proven right, and popped another piece of candy into his mouth.

I cursed the simplicity of the implant's programming, sat back down, and for the next half-hour or so I attempted to persuade Bill that his best course lay in doing absolutely nothing, in keeping a low profile. If he did, I told him, eventually the dust would settle and things would return to normal. He nodded and said, yes, yes, uh-huh, yet I could not be certain that my words were having an effect. I knew how resistant he could be to logic, and it was quite possible that he was only humoring me. But as I stood to take my leave of him, he did something that went some ways toward convincing me that I had made an impression: he reached out and caught my hand, held it for a second, only a second, but one during which I thought I felt the sorry hits of his life, the dim vibrations of all those sour loveless nights and lonely ejaculations. When he released my hand he turned away, appearing to be embarrassed. I was embarrassed myself. Embarrassed and, I must admit, a bit repelled at having this ungainly lump display affection toward me. Yet I was also moved, and trapped between those two poles of feeling, I hovered above him, not sure what to do or say. There was, however, no need for me to deliberate the matter. Before I could summon speech he began mumbling once again, lost in a chat with Mister C.

"Good night, Bill," I said.

He gave no response, as still as a Buddha on his cushion.

I stood beside him for a while, less observing him than cataloguing my emotions, then, puzzling more than a little over their complexity, I left him to his candy and his terror and his inner voices.

Apology was not so prickly a chore as I had feared. Arlie knew as well as I the demons that possessed us, and once I had submitted to a token humiliation, she relented and we made love. She was demanding in the act, wild and noisy, her teeth marked my shoulder, my neck; but as we lay together afterward in the dark, some trivial, gentle music trickling in from the speakers above us, she was tender and calm and seemed genuinely interested in the concerns of my day.

"God 'elp us!" she said. "You don't actually fink the Magnificence is at work 'ere, do you?"

"Christ, no!" I said. "Some miserable dwight's actin' on mad impulse, that's all. Probably done it 'cause his nanny wiped his bum too hard when he's a babe."

"Oi 'ope not," she said. "Oi've seen their work back 'ome too many toimes to ever want to see it again."

"You never told me you'd had dealings with the Magnificence."

"Oi never 'ad what you'd call dealin's with 'em, but they was all over our piece of 'eaven, they were. 'Alf the bloody houses sported some kind of daft mark. It was a bleedin' fertile field for 'em, with nobody 'avin' a job and the lads just 'angin' about on the corners and smokin' gannie.

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'Twas a rare day the Bills didn't come 'round to scrape up some yobbo wearing his guts for a necktie and the mark of his crime carved into his fore'ead. Nights you'd hear 'em chantin' down by the stadium. 'Orrid stuff they was singin'. Wearin' that cheap black satin gear and those awrful masks. But it 'ad its appeal. All the senile old 'ooligans were diggin' out their jackboots and razors, and wantin' to go marchin' again. And in the pubs the soaks would be sayin', yes, yes, they do the odd bad thing, the Magnificence, but they've got the public good to 'eart. The odd bad thing! Jesus! Oi've seen messages written on the pavement in 'uman bones. Colored girls with their 'ips broken and their legs lashed back behind their necks. Still breathin' and starin' at you with them 'ollow eyes, loike they were mad to die. You were lucky, John, to be living up in Chelsea."

"Lucky enough, I suppose," I said stiffly, leery of drawing such distinctions; the old British class wars, though somewhat muted on Solitaire, were far from dormant, and even between lovers, class could be a dicey subject. "Chelsea's not exactly the Elysian Fields."

"Oi don't mean nuffin' by it, luv. You don't have to tell me the 'ole damn world's gone rotten long ago. Oi remember how just a black scrap of a life looked loike a brilliant career when Oi was livin' there. Now Oi don't know how Oi stood it."

I pulled her close against me and we lay without speaking for a long while. Finally Arlie said, "You know, it's 'alf nice 'avin' 'im 'ere."

"Bill, you mean?"

"Yeah, Bill."

"I hope you'll still feel that way if he can't find the loo," I said.

Arlie giggled. "Nao, I'm serious. It's loike 'avin' family again. The feel of somebody snorin' away in the next room. That's the thing we miss 'avin' here. We're all so bloody isolated. Two's a crowd and all that. We're missin' the warmth."

"I suppose you're right."

I touched her breasts, smoothed my hand along the swell of her hip, and soon we were involved again, more gently than before, more giving to the other, as if what Arlie had said about family had created a resonance in our bodies. Afterward I was so fatigued, the darkness seemed to be slowly circulating around us, pricked by tiny bursts of actinic light, the way a djinn must circulate within its prison bottle, a murky cloud of genius and magic. I was at peace lying there, yet I felt strangely excited to be so peaceful and my thoughts, too, were strange, soft, almost formless, the kind of thoughts I recalled having had as a child when it had not yet dawned on me that all my dreams would eventually be hammered flat and cut into steely dies so they could withstand the dreadful pressures of a dreamless world.

Arlie snuggled closer to me, her hand sought mine, clasped it tightly. "Ah, Johnny," she said. "Toimes loike this, Oi fink Oi was born to forget it all."

* * *

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The next day I was able to track down the villain who had painted the menacing symbol on Bill's door. The cameras in the corridor outside his door had malfunctioned, permitting the act of vandalism to go unobserved; but this was hardly surprising—the damned things were always failing, and should they not fail on their own, it was no great feat to knock them out by using an electromagnet. Lacking a video record, I focused my attention on the personnel files. Only nine people on Solitaire proved to have had even minimal ties with the Strange Magnificence; by process of elimination I was able to reduce the number of possible culprits to three. The first of them I interviewed, Roger Thirwell, a pale, rabbity polymath in his mid-twenties who had emigrated from Manchester just the year before, admitted his guilt before I had scarcely begun his interrogation.

"I was only tryin' to do the wise and righteous," he said, squaring his shoulders and puffing out his meager chest. "Samuelson's been tellin' us we shouldn't sit back and allow things to just happen. We should let our voices be heard. Solitaire's our home. We should be the ones decide how it's run."

"And so, naturally," I said, "when it came time to let your majestic voice resound, the most compelling topic you could find upon which to make a statement was the fate of a halfwit."

"It's not that simple and you know it. His case speaks to a larger issue. Samuelson says. . . ."

"Fuck you," I said. "And fuck Samuelson." I was sick of him, sick of his Midlands accent, sick especially of his references to Samuelson. What possible service, I wondered, could a dwight such as he have provided for the Magnificence? Something to do with logistics, probably. Anticipating police strategies or solving computer defenses. Yet from what I knew of the Magnifience, it was hard to imagine them putting up with this nit for very long. They would find a hard use for him and then let him fall off the edge of the world.

"Why in hell's name did you paint that thing on his door?" I asked. "And don't tell me Samuelson ordered you to do it."

The light of hope came into his face, and I would have sworn he was about to create some fantasy concerning Samuelson and himself in order to shift the guilt to broader shoulders. But all he said was, "I wanted to scare him."

"You could have achieved that with a bloody stick figure," I said.

"Yeah, but no one else would have understood it. Samuelson says we ought to try to influence as many people as possible whenever we state our cause, no mattter how limited our aims. That way we enlist others in our dialogue."

I was starting to have some idea of what Samuelson's agenda might be, but I did not believe Thirwell could further enlighten me on the subject. "All you've succeeded in doing," I told him, "is to frighten other people. Or is it your opinion that there are those here who would welcome a chapter of the Magnificence?"

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He ducked his eyes and made no reply.

"If you're homesick for them, I can easily arrange for you to take a trip back to Manchester," I said.

This elicited from Thirwell a babble of pleas and promises. I saw that I would get no more out of him, and I cautioned him that if he were ever to trouble Bill again I would not hesitate to make good on my threat. I then sent him on his way and headed off to pay a call on Menckyn Samuelson.

Samuelson's apartment, like those belonging to most corporate regals, was situated in a large module adjoining the even larger module that housed the station's propulsion controls, and was furnished with antiques and pictures that would have fetched a dear price back on Earth, but here were absolutely priceless, less evidence of wealth than emblems of faith . . . the faith we were all taught to embrace, that one day life would be as once it had been, a vista of endless potential and possibility. The problem with Samuelson's digs, however, was that his taste was abysmally bad; he had assembled a motley collection of items, Guilford chests and blond Finnish chairs, a Jefferson corner cabinet and freeform video sculptures, Victorian sideboard and fiber-optic chandelier, that altogether created the impression one had stumbled into a pawn shop catering to millionaires. It may be that my amusement at this appalling display showed in my face, for though he presented a smile and an outstretched hand, I sensed a certain stiffness in his manner. Nevertheless, the politician in him brought him through that awkward moment. Soon he was nattering away, pouring me a glass of whiskey, ushering me to an easy chair, plopping himself down into another, giving out with an expansive sigh, and saying, "I'm so awfully glad you've come, John. I've been meaning to have you in for a cup of reminiscence, you know. Two old Londoners like ourselves, we can probably find a few choice topics to bang around."

He lifted his chin, beaming blandly, eyes half-lidded, as if expecting something pleasant to be dashed into his face. It was such a thespian pose, such a clichéd take on upper class manners, so redolent of someone trying to put on airs, I had to restrain a laugh. Everything about him struck me as being just the slightest bit off. He was a lean, middle-aged man, dressed in a loose cotton shirt and moleskin trousers, alert in manner, almost handsome, but the nose was a tad sharp, the eyes set a fraction too close together, the cheekbones not sufficiently prominent, the chin a touch insubstantial, too much forehead and not enough hair. He had the essential features of good breeding, yet none of the charming detail, like the runt of a pedigreed litter.

"Yes," I said, "we must do that sometime. However, today I've come on station business."

"I see." He leaned back, crossed his legs, cradled his whiskey in his lap. "Then p'rhaps after we've concluded your business, there'll be time for a chat, eh?"

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"Perhaps." I had a swallow of whiskey, savored the smoky flavor. "I'd like to talk with you about William Stamey."

"Ah, yes. Old Barnacle Bill." Samuelson's brow was creased by a single furrow, the sort of line a cartoonist would use to indicate a gently rolling sea. "A bothersome matter."

"It might be considerably less bothersome if you left it alone."

Not a crack in the veneer. He smiled, shook his head. "I should dearly love to, old fellow. But I'm afraid you've rather a short-sighted view of the situation. The question we must settle is not the question of Bill *per se,* but of general policy. We must develop clear guide. . . ."

"Come on! Give it up!" I said. "I'm not one of your damned pint and kidney pie boys who get all narky and start to drool at the thought of their rights being abused. Their rights! Jesus Christ! The poor scuts have been buggered more times than a Sydney whore, and they still think it feels good. You wouldn't waste a second on this if it were merely a question of policy. I want to know what you're really after."

"Oh my God," Samuelson said, bemused. "You're not going to be an easy lay, are you?"

"Not for you, darling. I'm saving myself for the one I love."

"And just who is that, I wonder." He swirled the whiskey in his glass, watched it settle. "What do you think I'm after?"

"Power. What else is it makes your toby stiffen?"

He made a dry noise. "A simplistic answer. Not inaccurate, I'll admit. But simplistic all the same."

"I'm here for an education," I told him, "not to give a lecture."

"And I may enlighten you," Samuelson said. "I very well may. But let me ask you something first. What's your interest in all this?"

"I'm looking after Bill's interests."

He arched an eyebrow. "Surely there's more to it than that."

"That's the sum of it. Aside from the odd deep-seated psychological motive, of course."

"Of course." His smile could have sliced an onion; when it vanished, his cheeks hollowed. "I should imagine there's an element of *noblesse oblige* involved."

"Call it what you like. The fact remains, I'm on the case."

"For now," he said. "These things have a way of changing."

"Is that a threat? Don't waste your time. I'm the oldest slut on the station, Samuelson. I know where all the big balls have been dragging, and I've made certain I'm protected. Should anything happen to me or mine, it's your superiors who're going to start squealing. They'll be most perturbed with you."

"You've nothing on me." This said with, I thought, forced confidence.

"True enough," I said. "But I'm working on it, don't you worry."

Samuelson drained his glass, got to his feet, went to the sideboard and poured himself a fresh whiskey. He held up the bottle, gave me an inquiring look.

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"Why not?" I let him fill my glass, which I then lifted in a toast. "To England. May the seas wash over her and make her clean."

He gave an amused snort. "England," he said, and drank. He sat back down, adjusted his bottom. "You're an amazing fellow, John. I've been told as much, but now, having had some firsthand experience, I believe my informants may have underestimated you." He pinched the crease of one trouserleg. "Let me put something to you. Not as a threat, but as an item for discussion. You do understand, don't you, that the sort of protection you've developed is not proof against every circumstance?"

"Absolutely. In the end it all comes down to a question of who's got the biggest guns and the will to use them. Naturally I'm prepared along those lines."

"I don't doubt it. But you're not seeking a war, are you?"

I knocked back half my whiskey, rested the glass on my lap. "Look here, I'm quite willing to live as one with you, no matter. Until lately, you've done nothing to interfere with my agenda. But this dust-up over Bill, and now this bit with your man Thirwell and his paint gun, I won't have it. Too many people here, Brits and Yanks alike, have a tendency to soil their nappy when they catch a scent of the Magnificence. I've no quarrel with you making a power play. And that's what you're doing, old boy. You're stirring up the groundlings, throwing a few scraps to the hounds so they'll be eager for the sound of your voice. You're after taking over the administrative end of things, and you've decided to give climbing the ladder of success a pass in favor of scaling the castle walls. A bloodless coup, perhaps. Or maybe a spot of blood thrown in to slake the fiercest appetites. Well, that's fine. I don't give a fuck who's sitting in the big chair, and I don't much care how they get there, so long as we maintain the status quo. But one thing I won't have is you frightening people."

"People are forever being frightened," he said. "Whether there's a cause for fear or not. But that's not my intent."

"Perhaps not. But you've frightened the bejesus out of Bill, and now you've frightened a good many others by bringing the Magnificence into the picture."

"Thirwell's not my responsibility."

"The hell he's not! He's the walking Book of Samuelson. Every other sentence begins, 'Samuelson says. . . .' Give him a pretty smile, and he'll be your leg-humper for life."

"Leg-humper?" Samuelson looked bewildered.

"A little dog," I said impatiently. "You know the kind. Randy all the time. Jumps up on you and goes to having his honeymoon with your calf."

"I've never heard the term. Not British, is it?"

"American, I think. I heard it somewhere. I don't know."

"Marvelous expression. I'll have to remember it."

"Remember this, too," I said, trying to pick up the beat of my tirade. "I'm holding you responsible for any whisper I hear of the Magnificence. Before we had this heart-to-heart I was inclined to believe you had no

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part in what Thirwell did. Now I'm not altogether sure. I think you're quite capable of using fear to manipulate the public. I think you may have known something of Thirwell's history and given him a nudge."

"Even if that were true," he said, "I don't understand the depth of your reaction. We're a long way from the Magnificence here. A daub of paint or two can't have much effect."

My jaw dropped a fraction on hearing that. "You're not from London. You couldn't be and still say that."

"Oh, I'm from London all right," he said coldly. "And I'm no virgin where the Magnificence is concerned. They left my brother stretched on King's Road one morning with the Equation of Undying Love scrawled in his own blood on the sidewalk beneath him. They mailed his private parts to his wife in a plastic container. But I've come a very long way from those days and those places. I'd be terrified of the Magnificence if they were here. But they're not here, and I'll be damned if I'll treat them like the bogeyman just because some sad little twit with too much brain and the social skills of a ferret paints the Magelantic Exorcism on somebody's door."

His statement rang true, but nevertheless I made a mental note to check on his brother. "Wonderful," I said. "It's good you've come to terms with all that. But not everyone here has managed to put as much distance between themselves and their old fears as you seem to have done."

"That may be, but I'm. . . ." He broke off, clicked his tongue against his teeth. "All right. I see your point." He tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. "Let's see if we can't reach an accord. It's not in my interests at the moment to break off my campaign against Bill, but"—he held up a hand to stop me from interrupting—"but I will acknowledge that I've no real ax to grind where he's concerned. He's serving a strictly utilitarian purpose. So here's what I'll do. I will not allow him to be shipped back to Earth. At a certain juncture, I'll defuse the campaign. Perhaps I'll even make a public apology. That should help return him to grace. In addition, I'll do what I can to prevent further incidents involving the Magnificence. Frankly I very much doubt there'll be further problems. If there are, it won't be because I'm encouraging them."

"All well and good," I said. "Very magnanimous, I'm sure. But nothing you've promised guarantees Bill's safety during the interim."

"You'll have to be his guarantee. I'll try to maintain the temper of the station at a simmer. The rest is up to you."

"Up to me? No, you're not going to avoid responsibility that way. I'll do my best to keep him from harm, but if he gets hurt, I'll hurt you. That much I can guarantee."

"Then let's hope that nothing happens to him, shall we? For both our sakes." His smile was so thin, such a sideways stretching of the lip muscles, I thought it must be making his gums ache. "Funny. I can't decide whether we've established a working relationship or declared war."

"I don't think it matters," I said.

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"No, probably not." He stood, straightened the fall of his trousers, and again gave me that bland, beaming, expectant look. "Well, I won't keep you any longer. Do drop around once the dust has settled. We'll have that chat."

"About London."

"Right." He moved to the door.

"I don't know as I'd have very much to say about London," I told him. "Nothing fit for reminiscence, at any rate."

"Really?" he said, ushering me out into the corridor. "The old girl's petticoats have gotten a trifle bloody, I'll admit. Terrible, the things that go on nowadays. The hunting parties, hive systems, knife dances. And of course, the Magnificence. But here, you know"—he patted his chest—"in her heart, I firmly believe there's still a bit of all right. Or maybe it's just I'm the sentimental sort. Like the song says, 'call 'er a satan, call 'er a whore, she'll always be Mother to me'."

Unlike Samuelson, I no longer thought of London as mother or home, or in any framework that smacked of the wholesome. Even "satan" would have been a euphemism. London for me was a flurry of night visions: a silhouetted figure standing in the window of a burning building, not waving its arms, not leaning out, but calm, waiting to be taken by the flames; men and women in tight black satin, white silk masks all stamped with the same feral, exultant expression, running through the streets, singing; moonlight painting the eddies of the Thames into silk, water lapping at a stone pier, and floating just beyond the shadow of the pier, the enormous bulk of a man I had shot only a minute before, nearly four hundred pounds of strangler, rapist, cannibal, brought down by a bullet weighing no more than one of his teeth; the flash of a shotgun from around a dark corner, like the flash of heat lightning; the charge of poisonous light flowing along the blade of a bloody macro-knife just removed from the body of a fellow detective; a garbage bag resting on a steel table that contained the neatly butchered remains of seven infants; the façade of St. Paul's dyed into a grooved chaos of vermillion, green, and purple by stone-destroying bacteria released by the artist, Miralda Hate; the wardrobe of clothing sewn of human skin and embroidered in gilt and glitter with verses from William Blake that we found in a vacant Brixton flat; the blind man who begged each evening on St. Martin's Lane, spiders crawling in the hollow globes of his glass eyes; the plague of saints, young men and women afflicted by a drug that bred in them the artificial personalities of Biblical characters and inspired them to martyr themselves during certain phases of the moon; the eyes of wild dogs in Hyde Park gleaming in the beam of my torch like the flat discs of highway reflectors; those and a thousand equally blighted memories, that was my London. Nightmare, grief, and endless fever.

It was Solitaire that was home and mother to me, and I treated it with the appropriate respect. Though I was an investigative officer, not a section guard, I spent a portion of nearly every day patrolling various

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areas, searching less for crime than for symptoms of London, incidences of infection that might produce London-like effects. The station was not one place, but many: one hundred and forty-three modules, several of which were larger than any of the Earth orbit stations, connected by corridors encased in pressure shells that could be disengaged by means of the Central Propulsion Control and—as each module was outfitted with engines—moved to a new position in the complex, or even to a new orbit; should the Central Propulsion Control (CPC) be destroyed or severely damaged, disengagement was automatic, and the modules would boost into pre-programmed orbits. I hardly ever bothered to include places such as the labs, tank farms, infirmaries, data management centers, fusion modules, and such on my unofficial rounds; nor did I include the surface of the station, the electronic and solar arrays, radiator panels, communications and tracking equipment; those areas were well maintained and had no need of a watchman. I generally limited myself to entertainment and dwelling modules like East Louie, where Bill's quarters and mine were located, idiosyncratic environments decorated with holographic scenarios so ancient that they had blanked out in patches and you would often see a coded designation or a stretch of metal wall interrupting the pattern of, say, a hieroglyphic mural; and from time to time I also inspected those sections of the station that were rarely visited and were only monitored via recordings several times a day—storage bays and transport hangars and the CPC (the cameras in those areas were supposed to transmit automatic alarms whenever anyone entered, but the alarm system was on the fritz at least half the time, and due to depleted staff and lack of materials, repairs such as that were not a high priority).

The CPC was an immense, white, portless room situated, as I've said, in the module adjoining that which housed Samuelson's digs and the rest of the corporate dwelling units. The room was segmented by plastic panels into work stations, contained banks of terminals and control panels, and was of little interest to me; but Bill, once he learned its function, was fascinated by the notion that his world could separate into dozens of smaller worlds and arrow off into the nothing, and each time we visited it, he would sit at the main panel and ask questions about its operation. There was never anyone else about, and I saw no harm in answering the questions. Bill did not have sufficient mental capacity to understand the concept of launch codes, let alone to program a computer so it would accept them. Solitaire was the only world he would ever know, and he was eager to accumulate as much knowledge about it as possible. Thus I encouraged his curiosity and showed him how to call up pertinent information on his own computer.

Due to Arlie's sympathetic response, Bill took to sleeping in our front room nearly every night, this in addition to tagging along on my rounds, and therefore it was inevitable that we became closer; however, closeness is not a term I happily apply to the relationship. Suffice it to say that he

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grew less defiant and petulant, somewhat more open and, as a consequence, more demanding of attention. Because his behavior had been modified to some degree, I found his demands more tolerable. He continued to cling to the notion that in order to save himself he would have to perform some valuable service to the community, but he never insisted that I help him in this; he appeared satisfied merely to hang about and do things with me. And to my surprise I found there were some things I actually enjoyed doing with him. I took especial pleasure in going outside with him, in accompanying him on *his* rounds and watching as he cleared barnacles away from communications equipment and other delicate mechanisms.

Sauter's Barnacle was, of course, not a true barnacle, yet it possessed certain similarities to its namesake, the most observable of which was a supporting structure that consisted of a hard exoskeleton divided into plates so as to allow movement. They bore a passing resemblance to unopened buds, the largest about the size of a man's fist, and they were variously colored, some streaked with metallic shades of red, green, gold, and silver (their coloration depended to a great extent on the nature of the substrate and their nutrient sources), so that when you saw a colony of them from a distance, spreading over the surface of a module—and all the modules were covered by hundreds of thousands of them—they had the look of glittering beds of moss or lichen. I knew almost nothing about them, only that they fed on dust, that they were sensitive to changes in light, that they were not found within the orbit of Mars, and that wherever there was a space station, they were, as my immediate superior, the Chief of Security, Gerald Sessions, put it, "thick as flies on shit." Once it had been learned that they did no harm, that, indeed, their excretions served to strengthen the outer shells of the modules, interest in them had fallen off sharply. There was, I believe, some ongoing research into their physical characteristics, but it was not of high priority.

Except with Bill.

To Bill the barnacles were purpose, a reason for being. They were, apart from Mister C, the most important creatures in the universe, and he was obsessive in his attentiveness toward them. Watching him stump about over the skin of the station, huge and clumsy in his pressure suit, a monstrous figure made to appear even more monstrous by the light spraying up around him from this or that port, hosing offending clumps of barnacles with bursts of oxygen from the tank that floated alongside him, sending them drifting up from their perches, I had the impression not of someone performing a menial task, but of a gardener tending his prize roses or—more aptly—a shepherd his flock. And though according to the best information, the barnacles were mindless things, incapable of any activity more sophisticated than obeying the basic urges of feeding and reproduction, it seemed they responded to him; even after he had chased them away they would wobble about him like strange pets, bumping against his faceplate and sometimes settling on him briefly, vivid against the white material of the pressure suit, making it appear that

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he was wearing jeweled rosettes on his back and shoulders. (I did not understand at the time that these were females which, unable to effect true mobility, had been stimulated to detach from the station by the oxygen and now were unable to reattach to the colony.)

With Bill's example before me, I was no longer able to take the barnacles for granted, and I began reading about them whenever I had a spare moment. I discovered that the exoskeleton was an organic-inorganic matrix composed of carbon compounds and silicate minerals, primarily olivine, pyroxene, and magnetite, substances commonly found in meteorites. Changes in light intensity were registered by iridescent photophores that dotted the plates; even the finest spray of dust passing between the barnacle and a light source would trigger neurological activity and stimulate the opening of aperture plates, permitting the egress of what Jacob Sauter (the barnacles' Linnaeus, an amateur at biology) had called the "tongue," an organ utilized both in feeding and in the transmission of seminal material from the male to the female. I learned that only the males could move about the colony, and that they did so by first attaching to the substrate with their tongues, which were coated with adhesive material, then detaching at one of their upper plate segments, and finally re-attaching to the colony with the stubby segmented stalks that depended from their bottom plates. "In effect," Sauter had written, "they are doing cartwheels."

The most profound thing I discovered, however, had nothing to do with the barnacles, or rather had only peripherally to do with them, and was essentially a rediscovery, a rewakening of my wonderment at the bleak majesty surrounding us. The cold diamond chaos of the stars, shining so brightly they might have just been finished that day; the sun, old god grown small and tolerable to the naked eye; the surreal brilliance and solidity that even the most mundane object acquired against the backdrop of that black, unvarying distance; that blackness itself, somehow managing to seem both ominous and serene, absence and presence, metal-hard and soft as illusion, like a fold in God's magisterial robe; the station with its spidery complexes of interconnecting corridors and modules, all coated with the rainbow swirls and streaks of the barnacles' glittering colors, and beams of light spearing out from it at every angle, like some mad, gay, rickety toy, the sight of which made me expect to hear calliope music; the Earth transport vessels, gray and bulky as whales, berthed in the geometric webs of their docks; the remote white islands of the assembly platforms, and still more remote, made visible by setting one's faceplate for maximum visual enhancement, the tiny silver needle we were soon to hurl into the haystack of the unknown. It was glorious, that vista. It made a comprehensible map of our endeavors and led me to understand that we had not botched it completely. Not yet. I had seen it all before, but Bill's devotion to the barnacles had rekindled the embers of my soul, restored my cognizance of the scope of our adventure, and looking out over the station, I would think I could feel the entire blast and spin of creation inside my head, the flood of particles

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from a trillion suns, the crackling conversations of electric clouds to whom the frozen seas of ammonia above which they drifted were repositories of nostalgia, the endless fall of matter through the less-than-nothing of a pure anomaly, the white face of Christ blurred and streaming within the frost-colored fire of a comet's head, the quasars not yet congealed into dragons and their centuries, the unerring persistence of meteors that travel for uncounted millennia through the zero dark to scoot and burn across the skies onto the exposure plates of mild astronomers and populate the legends of a summer night and tumble into cinders over the ghosted peaks of the Karakorum and then are blown onto the back porches of men who have never turned their faces to the sky and into the dreams of children. I would have a plunderous sense of my own destiny, and would imagine myself hurling through the plenum at the speed of thought, of wish, accumulating a momentum that was in itself a charge to go, to witness, to take, and I was so enlivened I would believe for an instant that, like a hero returning from war, I could lift my hand and let shine a blessing down upon everyone around me, enabling them to see and feel all I had seen and felt, to know as I knew that despite everything we were closer to heaven than we had ever been before.

It was difficult for me to regain my ordinary take on life following these excursions, but after the departure of the lightship *Sojourner,* an event that Bill and I observed together from a catwalk atop the solar array in East Louie, it was thrust hard upon me that I had best set a limit on my woolgathering and concentrate on the matters at hand, for it was coming more and more to look as if the Strange Magnificence had gained a foothold on Solitaire. Scraps of black satin had been found tied to several crates in one of the storage bays, one of them containing drugs; copies of *The Book of Inexhaustible Delirium* began turning up; and while I was on rounds with Bill one day, I discovered a cache of packet charges in the magnetism lab, each about half the size of a flattened soccer ball, any one of which would have been sufficient to destroy a module; Gerald Sessions and I divided them up and stored them in our apartments, not trusting our staff with the knowledge of their existence. Perhaps the most troubling thing of all, the basic question of whether or not the Magnificence had the common good to heart was being debated in every quarter of the station, an argument inspired by fear and fear alone, and leading to bloody fights and an increase in racial tension and perversion of every sort. The power of the Strange Magnificence, you see, lay in the subversive nihilism of their doctrine, which put forward the idea that it was man's duty to express all his urges, no matter how dark or violent, and that from the universal exorcism of these black secrets would ultimately derive a pure consensus, a vast averaging of all possible behaviors that would in turn reveal the true character of God and the manifest destiny of the race. Thus the leaders of the Magnificence saw nothing contradictory in funding a group in York, say, devoted to the expulsion of Pakistanis from Britain by whatever means necessary while simultaneously supporting a Sufi cult. They had no moral or philosophical problem with anything because according to them the ultimate morality

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was a work-in-progress. Their tracts were utter tripe, quasi-intellectual homily dressed up in the kind of adjective-heavy, gothic prose once used to give weight to stories of ghosts and ancient evil; their anthems were even less artful, but the style suited the product, and the product was an easy sell to the disenfranchised, the desperate and the mad, categories into one of which almost everyone alive would fit to some extent, and definitely were one or another descriptive of everyone on Solitaire. As I had promised him, once these symptoms started to manifest, I approached Samuelson again, but he gave every evidence of being as concerned about the Magnificence as was I, and though I was not certain I believed his pose, I was too busy with my official duties and my unofficial one—protecting Bill, who had become the target of increased abuse—to devote much time to him. Then came the day of the launch.

It was beautiful, of course. First a tiny stream of fire, like a scratch made on a wall painted black, revealing a white undercoat. This grew smaller and smaller, and eventually disappeared; but mere seconds after its disappearance, what looked to be an iridescent crack began to spread across the blackness, reaching from the place where *Sojourner* had gone superluminal to its point of departure, widening to a finger's breadth, then a hand's, and more, like an all-colored piece of lightning hardened into a great jagged sword that was sundering the void, and as it swung toward us, widening still, I thought I saw in it intimations of faces and forms and things written, as one sees the images of circuitry and patterns such as might be found on the skin of animals when staring at the grain of a varnished board, and the sight of these half-glimpsed faces and the rest, not quite decipherable yet familiar in the way a vast and complex sky with beams of sunlight shafting down through dark clouds appears to express a familiar glory . . . those sights were accompanied by a feeling of instability, a shivery apprehension of my own insubstantiality which, although it shook me to my soul, disabling any attempt to reject it, was also curiously exalting, and I yearned for that sword to swing through me, to bear me away into a thundering genesis where I would achieve completion, and afterward, after it had faded, leaving me bereft and confused, my focus upon it had been so intent, I felt I had witnessed not an exercise of intricate technology but a simple magical act of the sort used to summon demons from the ready rooms of Hell or to wake a white spirit in the depths of an underground lake. I turned to Bill. His faceplate was awash in reflected light, and what I could make out of his face was colored an eerie green by the read-outs inside his helmet. His mouth was opened, his eyes wide. I spoke to him, saying I can't recall what, but wanting him to second my amazement at the wonderful thing we had seen.

"Somethin's wrong," he said.

I realized then that he was gazing in another direction; he might have seen *Sojourner's* departure, but only out of the corner of his eye. His attention was fixed upon one of the modules—the avionics lab, I believe—from which a large number of barnacles had detached and were drifting off into space.

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"Why're they doin' that?" he asked. "Why're they leavin'?"

"They're probably sick of it here," I said, disgruntled by his lack of sensitivity. "Like the rest of us."

"No," he said. "No, must be somethin' wrong. They wouldn't leave 'less somethin's wrong."

"Fine," I said. "Something's wrong. Let's go back in."

He followed me reluctantly into the airlock, and once we had shucked off our suits, he talked about the barnacles all the way back to my quarters, insisting that they would not have vacated the station if there had been nothing wrong.

"They like it here," he said. "There's lots of dust, and nobody bothers 'em much. And they. . . ."

"Christ!" I said. "If something's wrong, figure it out and tell me! Don't just blither on!"

"I can't." He ducked his eyes, swung his arms in exaggerated fashion, as if he were getting ready to skip. "I don't know how to figure it out."

"Ask Mister C." We had reached my door, and I punched out the entry code.

"He doesn't care." Bill pushed out his lower lip to cover the upper, and he shook his head back and forth, actually not shaking it so much as swinging it in great slow arcs. "He thinks it's stupid."

"What?" The door cycled open, the front room was pitch-dark.

"The barnacles," Bill said. "He thinks everything I like is stupid. The barnacles and the CPC and. . . ."

Just then I heard Arlie scream, and somebody came hurtling out of the dark, knocking me into a chair and down onto the floor. In the spill of light from the corridor, I saw Arlie getting to her feet, covering her breasts with her arms. Her blouse was hanging in tatters about her waist; her jeans were pushed down past her hips; her mouth was bloody. She tried to speak, but only managed a sob.

Sickened and terrified at the sight of her, I scrambled out into the corridor. A man dressed all in black was sprinting away, just turning off into one of the common rooms. I ran after him. Each step spiked the boil of my emotions with rage, and by the time I entered the common room, done up as the VR version of a pub, with dart boards and dusty, dark wood, and a few fraudulent old red-cheeked men slumped at corner tables, there was murder in my heart. I yelled at people taking their ease to call Security, then raced into the next corridor.

Not a sign of the man in black.

The corridor was ranged by about twenty doors, the panel of light above most showing blue, signalling that no one was within. I was about to try one of the occupied apartments when I noticed that the telltale beside the airlock hatch was winking red. I went over to the hatch, switched on the closed circuit camera. On the screen above the control panel appeared a grainy black-and-white picture of the airlock's interior; the man I had been chasing was pacing back and forth, making an erratic humming noise. A pale, twitchy young man with a malnourished look

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and bones that seemed as frail as a bird's, the product of some row-house madonna and her pimply king, of not enough veggies and too many cigarettes, of centuries of a type of ignorance as peculiarly British as the hand-rolled lawns of family estates. I recognized him at once. Roger Thirwell. I also recognized his clothes. The tight black satin trousers and shirt of the Strange Magnificence, dotted with badges proclaiming levels of spiritual attainment and attendance at this or that function.

"Hello, Roger," I said into the intercom. "Lovely day for a rape, isn't it, you filthy bastard?"

He glanced around, then up to the monitor. Fear came into his face, then was washed away by hostility, which in turn was replaced by a sort of sneering happiness. "Send me to Manchester, will you?" he said. "Send me down the tube to bloody Manchester! I think not! Perhaps you realize now I'm not the sort to take threats lying down."

"Yeah, you're a fucking hero! Why don't you come out and show me how much of a man you are."

He appeared distracted, as if he had not heard me. I began to suspect that he was drugged, but drugged or not, I hated him.

"Come on out of there!" I said. "I swear to God, I'll be gentle."

"I'll show you," he said. "You want to see the man I am, I'll show you."

But he made no move.

"I had her in the mouth," he said quietly. "She's got a lovely, lovely mouth."

I didn't believe him, but the words afflicted me nevertheless. I pounded on the hatch. "You beady-eyed piece of shit! Come out, damn you!"

Voices talking excitedly behind me, then somebody put an arm on my shoulder and said in a carefully enunciated baritone, "Let me handle this one, John."

It was Gerald Sessions, my superior, a spindly black man with a handsome, open face and freckly light complexion and spidery arms that possessed inordinate strength. He was a quiet, private sort, not given to displays of emotion, understated in all ways, possessed of the glum manner of someone who continually feels themselves put upon; yet because of our years together, he was a man for whom I had developed some affection, and though I trusted no one completely, he was one of the few people whom I was willing to let watch my back. Standing beside him were four guards, among them his bodyguard and lover, Ernesto Carbajal, a little fume of a fellow with thick, oily yet well-tended black hair and a prissy cast to his features; and behind them, at a remove, was a grave-looking Menckyn Samuelson, nattily attired in dinner jacket and white trousers. Apparently he had been called away from a social occasion.

"No, thank you," I told Gerald. "I plan to hurt the son of a bitch. Send someone round to check on Arlie, will you?"

"It's been taken care of." He studied me a moment. "All right. Just don't kill him."

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I turned back to the screen just as Thirwell, who had moved to the outer hatch and was gazing at the control panel, burst into song.

"Night, my brother, gather round me,
Breed the reign of violence,
And with temptations of the spi-i-rit
Blight the curse of innocence.
Oh, supple daughters of the twilight,
Will we have all our pleasures spent,
when God emerges from the shadows,
blinding in his Strange Magni-i-fi-i-cence . . ."

He broke off and let out a weak chuckle. I was so astounded by this behavior that my anger was muted and my investigative sensibilities engaged.

"Who're your contacts on Solitaire?" I asked. "Talk to me, and maybe things will go easier for you."

Thirwell continued staring at the panel, seemingly transfixed by it.

"Give it up, Roger," I said. "Tell us about the Magnificence. You help us, and we'll do right by you, I swear."

He lifted his face to the ceiling and, in a shattered tone, verging on tears, said, "Oh, God!"

"I may be wrong," I said, "but I don't believe he's going to answer you. You'd best brace it up in there, get your head clear."

"I don't know," he said.

"Sure you do. You know. It was your brains got you here. Now use them. Think. You have to make the best of this you can." It was hard to make promises of leniency to this little grout who'd had his hands on Arlie, but the rectitude of the job provided me a framework in which I was able to function. "Look here, I can't predict what's going to happen, but I can give you this much. You tell us what you know, chapter and verse, and I'll speak up for you. There could be mitigating circumstances. Drugs. Coercion. Blackmail. That strike a chord, Roger? Hasn't someone been pushing you into this? Yeah, yeah, I thought so. Mitigating circumstances. That being the case, it's likely the corporation will go lightly with you. And one thing I can promise for certain sure. We'll keep you safe from the Magnificence."

Thirwell turned to the monitor. From the working of his mouth and the darting of his eyes, I could see he was close to falling apart.

"That's it, there's the lad. Come along home."

"The Magnificence." He glanced about, as if concerned that someone might be eavesdropping. "They told me . . . uh . . . I. . . ." He swallowed hard and peered at the camera as if trying to see through to the other side of the lens. "I'm frightened," he said in a whispery, conspiratorial tone.

"We're all frightened, Roger. It's shit like the Magnificence keeps us frightened. Time to stop being afraid, don't you think. Maybe that's the

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only way to stop. Just to do it, I mean. Just to say, the hell with this! I'm. . . ."

"P'rhaps if I had a word with him," said Samuelson, leaning in over my shoulder. "You said I had some influence with the boy. P'rhaps. . . ."

I shoved him against the wall; Gerald caught him on the rebound and slung him along the corridor, holding a finger up to his lips, indicating that Samuelson should keep very quiet. But the damage was done. Thirwell had turned back to the control panel and was punching in the code that would break the seal on the outer hatch.

"Don't be an ass!" I said. "That way's no good for anyone."

He finished punching in the code and stood staring at the stud that would cycle the lock open. The Danger lights above the inner hatch were winking, and a computer voice had begun repeating, Warning, Warning, The outer hatch has been unsealed, the airlock has not been depressurized, Warning, Warning. . . .

"Don't do it, Roger!"

"I have to," he said. "I realize that now. I was confused, but now it's okay. I can do it."

"Nobody wants this to happen, Roger."

"I do, I want it."

"Listen to me!"

Thirwell's hand went falteringly toward the stud. "Lord of the alley mouths," he said, "Lord of the rifles, Lord of the inflamed, Thou who hath committed every vileness. . . ."

"For Christ's sake, man!" I said. "Nobody's going to hurt you. Not the Magnificence, not anyone. I'll guarantee your safety."

". . . every sin, every violence, stand with me now, help me shape this dying into an undying love. . . ." His voice dropped in volume, becoming too low to hear.

"Goddamn it, Thirwell! You silly bastard. Will you stop jabbering that nonsense! Don't give in to it! Don't listen to what they've taught you. It's all utter rot!"

Thirwell looked up at the camera, at me. Terror warped his features for a moment, but then the lines of tension softened and he giggled. "He's right," he said. "The man's dead on right. You'll never understand."

"Who's right? What won't I understand?"

"Watch," said Thirwell gleefully. "Watch my face."

I kept silent, trying to think of the perfect thing to say, something to foil his demented impulse.

"Are you watching?"

"I want to understand," I said. "I want you to help me understand. Will you help me, Roger? Will you tell me about the Magnificence?"

"I can't. I can't explain it." He drew a deep breath, let it out slowly. "But I'll show you."

He smiled blissfully at the camera as he pushed the stud.

Explosive decompression, even when viewed on a black-and-white monitor, is not a good thing to see. I looked away. Inadvertently, my eyes

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went to Samuelson. He was standing about fifteen feet away, hands behind his back, expressionless, like a minister composing himself before delivering his sermon; but there was something else evident in that lean, blank face, something happening beneath the surface, some slight engorgement, and I knew, *knew,* that he was not distressed in the least by the death, that he was pleased by it. No one of his position, I thought, would be so ingenuous as to interrupt a security man trying to talk in a potential suicide. And if what he had done to Thirwell had been intentional, a poorly disguised threat, if he had that much power and menace at his command, then he might well be responsible for what Thirwell had done to Arlie.

I strolled over to him. His eyes tracked my movements. I stopped about four feet away and studied him, searching for signs of guilt, for hints of a black satin past, of torchlight and blood and group sing-alongs. There was weakness in his face, but was it a weakness bred by perversion and brutality, or was it simply a product of fear? I decided that for Arlie's sake, for Thirwell's, I should assume the worst. "Guess what I'm going to do next?" I asked him. Before he could answer I kicked him in the pit of the stomach, and as he crumpled, I struck him a chopping left to the jaw that twisted his head a quarter-turn. Two of the guards started toward me, but I warned them back. Carbajal fixed me with a look of prim disapproval.

"That was a stupid damn thing to do," said Gerald, ambling over and gazing down at Samuelson, who was moaning, stirring.

"He deserves worse," I said. "Thirwell was coming out. I'm certain of it. And then this bastard opened his mouth."

"Yeah." Gerald leaned against the wall, crossed his legs. "So how come you figure he did it?"

"Why don't you ask him? Be interesting to see how he responds."

Gerald let out a sardonic laugh. "Man's an altruist. He was trying to help." He picked at a rough place on one of his knuckles. "The real question I got is how deep he's in it. Whether he's involved with the Magnificence, or if he's just trying to convince everyone he is, I need to know so I can make an informed decision."

I did not much care for the edge of coldness in his voice. "And what decision is that, pray?"

Carbajal, staring at me over his shoulder, flashed me a knowing smile.

"He already don't like you, John," said Gerald. "Man told me so. Now he's gonna want your ass on a plaque. And I have to decide whether or not I should let him have you."

"Oh, really?"

"This is some serious crap, man. I defy Samuelson, we're gonna have us one helluva situation. Security lined up against Administration."

Samuelson was trying to sit up; his jaw was swollen and discolored. I hoped it was broken.

"We could be talkin' about a war," Gerald said.

"I think you're exaggerating," I said. "Even so, a civil war wouldn't be

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the worst thing that could happen, not so long as the right side won. There are a number of assholes on station who would make splendid casualties."

Gerald said, "No comment."

Samuelson had managed to prop himself up on an elbow. "I want you to arrest him," he said to Gerald.

I looked at Gerald. "Might I have a few words with him before you decide?"

He met my eyes for a few beats, then shook his head in dismay. "Aw, fuck it," he said.

"Thanks, friend," I said.

"Fuck you, too," he said; he walked a couple of paces away and stood gazing off along the corridor; Carbajal went with him, whispered in his ear and rubbed his shoulders.

"Did you hear what I told you?" Samuelson heaved himself up into a sitting position, cupping his jaw. "Arrest him. Now!"

"Here, let me help you up." I grabbed a fistful of Samuelson's jacket, hauled him to his feet, and slammed him into the wall. "There. All better, are we?"

Samuelson's eyes darted left to right, hoping for allies. I bashed his head against the wall to get his attention, and he struggled against my hold.

"Such a tragedy," I said in my best upper crust accent. "The death of young Thirwell, what?"

The fight went out of him; his eyes held on mine.

"That was as calculated a bit of murder as I've seen in many a year," I told him.

"I haven't the foggiest notion what you're talking about!"

"Oh, yes you do! I had him walking the tightrope back. Then you popped in and reminded him of the consequences he'd be facing should he betray the Magnificence. God only knows what he thought you had in store for him."

"I did no such thing! I was. . . ."

I dug the fingers of my left hand in behind his windpipe; I would have liked to squeeze until thumb and fingers touched, but I only applied enough force to make him squeak. "Shut your gob! I'm not finished." I adjusted my grip to give him more air. "You're dirty, Samuelson. You're the germ that's causing all the pale looks around here. I don't know how you got past the screens, but that's not important. Sooner or later I'm going to have your balls for breakfast. And when I've cleaned my plate, I'll send what's left of you to the same place you chased Thirwell. Of course you could tell me the names of everyone on Solitaire who's involved with the Magnificence. That might weaken my resolve. But don't be too long about it, because I am fucking lusting for you. I can scarcely wait for you to thwart me. My saliva gets all thick and ropy when I think of the times we could have together." I gave him a shake, listened to him gurgle. "I know what you are, and I know what you want. You've got a

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dream, don't you? A vast, splendid dream of men in black satin populating the stars. New planets to befoul. Well, it's just not going to happen. If it ever comes to pass that a ship returns with good news, you won't be on it, son. Nor will any of your tribe. You'll be floating out there in the black grip of Jesus, with your blood all frozen in sprays around you and your hearts stuffed in your fucking mouths." I released him, gave him a cheerful wink. "All right. Go ahead. Your innings."

Samuelson scooted away along the wall, holding his throat. "You're mad!" He glanced over at Gerald. "The both of you!"

Gerald shrugged, spread his hands. "It's part of the job description."

"May we take it," I said to Samuelson, "that you're not intending to confess at this time?"

Samuelson noticed, as had I, that a number of people had come out of the common room and were watching the proceedings. "I'll tell you what I intend," he said, pulling himself erect in an attempt to look impressive. "I intend to make a detailed report concerning your disregard for authority and your abuse of position."

"Now, now," Gerald said, walking toward him. "Let's have no threats. Otherwise somebody"—his voice built into a shout—"somebody might lose their temper!" He accompanied the shout by slapping his palm against the wall, and this sent Samuelson staggering back another dozen feet or so.

Several of the gathering laughed.

"Come clean, man," I said to Samuelson. "Do the right thing. I'm told it's better than sex once those horrid secrets start spilling out."

"If it'll make you feel any easier, you can dress up in your black satins first," Gerald said. "Having that smooth stuff next to your skin, that'll put a nice wiggle on things."

"You know, Gerald," I said. "Maybe these poofs are onto something. Maybe the Magnificence has a great deal to offer."

"I'm always interested in upgrading my pleasure potential," he said. "Why don't you give us the sales pitch, Samuelson?"

"Yeah," I said. "Let's hear about all the snarky quivers you get from twisting the arms off a virgin."

The laughter swelled in volume, inspired by Samuelson's expression of foolish impotence.

"You don't understand who you're dealing with," he said. "But you will, I promise."

There, I said to myself, there's his confession. Not enough to bring into court, but for a moment it was there in his face, all the sick hauteur and corrupted passion of his tribe.

"I bet you're a real important man with the Magnificence," said Gerald. "Bet you even got a title."

"Minister of Scum and Delirium," I suggested.

"I like it," said Gerald. "How 'bout Secretary of the Inferior?"

"Grand High Salamander," said Carbajal, and tittered.

"Master of the Excremental."

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"Stop it," said Samuelson, clenching his fists; he looked ready to stamp his foot and cry.

Several other titular suggestions came from the crowd of onlookers, and Gerald offered, "Queen of the Shitlickers."

"I'm warning you," said Samuelson, then he shouted, "I am warning you!" He was flushed, trembling. All the twitchy material of his inner core exposed. It had been fun bashing him about, but now I wanted to put my heel on him, feel him crunch underfoot.

"Go on," Gerald said. "Get along home. You've done all you can here."

Samuelson shot him an unsteady look, as if not sure what Gerald was telling him.

Gerald waved him off. "We'll talk soon."

"Yes," said Samuelson, straightening his jacket, trying to muster a shred of dignity. "Yes, indeed, we most certainly will." He delivered what I suppose he hoped was a withering stare and stalked off along the corridor.

"There goes an asshole on a mission," said Gerald, watching him round the bend.

"Not a doubt in my mind," I said.

"Trouble." Gerald scuffed his heel against the steel floor, glanced down as if expecting to see a mark. "No shit, the man's trouble."

"So are we," I said.

"Yeah, uh-huh." He sounded unconvinced.

We exchanged a quick glance. We had been through a lot together, Gerald and I, and I knew by the tilt of his head, the wry set of his mouth, that he was very worried. I was about to make a stab at boosting his spirits when I remembered something more pressing.

"Oh, Christ!" I said. "Arlie! I've got to get back."

"Forgot about her, huh?" He nodded gloomily, as if my forgetfulness were something he had long decried. "You know you're an asshole, don't you? You know you don't deserve the love of woman or the friendship of man."

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "Can you handle things here?"

He made a gesture of dismissal. Another morose nod. "Just so you know," he said.

There were no seasons on Solitaire, no quick lapses into cold, dark weather, no sudden transformations into flowers and greenery; yet it seemed that in those days after Thirwell's suicide the station passed through an autumnal dimming, one lacking changes in foliage and temperature, but having in their stead a flourishing of black satin ribbons and ugly rumors, a gradual decaying of the spirit of the place into an oppressive atmosphere of sullen wariness, and the slow occlusion of all the visible brightness of our lives, a slump of patronage in the bars, the common rooms standing empty, incidences of decline that reminded me in sum of the stubborn resistance of the English oaks to their inevitable change, their profuse and solemn green surrendering bit by bit to the

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sparse imperatives of winter, like a strong man's will gradually being eroded by grief.

War did not come immediately, as Gerald had predicted, but the sporadic violences continued, along with the arguments concerning the true intentions and nature of the Strange Magnificence, and few of us doubted that war, or something akin to it, was in the offing. Everyone went about their duties hurriedly, grimly—everyone, that is, except for Bill. He was so absorbed by his own difficulties, I doubt he noticed any of this, and though the focus of hostility had shifted away from him to an extent, becoming more diffuse and general, he grew increasingly agitated and continued to prattle on about having to "do something" and—this a new chord in his simple symphony—that something must be terribly wrong because the barnacles were leaving.

That they were leaving was undeniable. Every hour saw the migration of thousands more, and large areas of the station's surface had been laid bare. Not completely bare, mind you. There remained a layer of the substrate laid down by the females, greenish silver in color, but nonetheless it was a shock to see the station so denuded. I gave no real credence to Bill's contention that we were in danger, but neither did I totally disregard it, and so, partly to calm him, to reassure him that the matter was being investigated, I went back to Jacob Sauter's notes to learn if such migrations were to be expected.

According to the notes, pre-adult barnacles—Sauter called them "larvae"—free-floated in space, each encapsulated in its own segment of a tube whose ends had been annealed so as to form a ring. Like the adult barnacle, the exterior of the ring was dotted with light-sensitive photophores, and when a suitable place for attachment was sensed, the ring colony was able to orient itself by means of excretions sprayed through pores in the skin of the tube, a method not dissimilar to that utilized by orbital vessels when aligning themselves for re-entry. The slightest change in forward momentum induced secretions to occur along the edge of the colony oriented for imminent attachment, and ultimately the colony stuck to its new home, whereupon the females excreted an acidic substrate that bonded with the metal. The barnacles were hermaphroditic, and the initial metamorphitosis always resulted in female barnacles alone. Once the female colony grew dense, some of the females would become male. When the colony reached a certain density it reproduced *en masse*. As the larval tubes were secreted, they sometimes intertwined, and this would result in braided ring colonies, which helped insure variation in the gene pool. And that was all I could find on the subject of migration. If Sauter were to be believed, by giving up their purchase on the station, the barnacles were essentially placing their fate in the hands of God, taking the chance—and given the vastness of space, the absence of ring secretions, it was an extremely slim chance—that they would happen to bump into something and be able to cling long enough to attach themselves. If one were to judge their actions in human terms, it would appear that they must be terrified of something, otherwise they

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would stay where they were; but it would require an immense logical leap for me to judge them according to those standards and I had no idea what was responsible for their exodus.

Following my examination of Sauter's notes I persuaded Gerald to accompany me on an inspection tour of Solitaire's surface. I thought seeing the migration for himself might affect him more profoundly than had the camera views, and that he might then join me in entertaining the suspicion that—as unlikely a prospect as it was—Bill had stumbled onto something. But Gerald was not moved to agreement.

"Man, I don't know," he said as we stood on the surface of East Louie, looking out toward the CPC and the administration module. There were a few sparse patches of barnacles around us, creatures that for whatever reason—impaired sensitivity, some form of silicate stubbornness—had not abandoned the station. Now and then one or several would drift up toward the glittering clouds of their fellows that shone against the blackness like outcroppings of mica in anthracite. "What do I know about these damn things! They could be doing anything. Could be they ran out of food, and that's why they're moving. Shit! You giving the idiot way too much credit! He's got his own reasons for wanting this to mean something."

I could not argue with him. It would be entirely consistent with Bill's character for him to view the migration as part of his personal apocalypse, and his growing agitation might stem from the fact that he saw his world being whittled down, his usefulness reduced, and thus his existence menaced all the more.

"Still," I said, "it seems odd."

" 'Odd' ain't enough. Weird, now, that might carry some weight. Crazy. Run amok. They qualify for my attention. But 'odd' I can live with. You want to worry about this, I can't stop you. Me, I got more important things to do. And so do you."

"I'm doing my job, don't you worry."

"Okay. Tell me about it."

Through the glaze of reflection on his faceplate, I could only make out his eyes and his forehead, and these gave no clue to his mood.

"There's not very much to tell. As far as I can determine Samuelson's pure through and through. There's a curious lack of depth to the background material, a few dead ends in the investigative reports. Deceased informants. Vanished employers. That sort of thing. It doesn't feel quite right to me, but it's nothing I could bring to the corporation. And it does appear that his elder brother was murdered by the Magnificence, which establishes at least one of his *bona fides*."

"If Samuelson's part of the Magnificence, I. . . ."

" 'If,' my ass!" I said. "You know damned well he is."

"I was going to say, his brother's murder is just the kind of tactic they like to use in order to draw suspicion away from one of their own. Hell, he may have hated his brother."

"Or he may have loved him and wanted the pain."

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Gerald grunted.

"I've isolated fourteen files that have a sketchiness reminiscent of Samuelson's," I said. "Of course that doesn't prove anything. Most of them are administration and most are relatively new on Solitaire. But only a couple are his close associates."

"That makes it more likely they're all dirty. They don't believe in bunching up. I'll check into it." I heard a burst of static over my earphones, which meant that he had let out a heavy sigh. "The damn thing is," he went on, "Samuelson might not be the lead dog. Whoever's running things might be keeping in the shadows for now."

"No, not a chance," I said. "Samuelson's too lovely in the part."

A construction sled, a boxy thing of silver struts powered by a man in a rocket pack, went arcing up from the zero physics lab and boosted toward one of the assembly platforms; all manner of objects were lashed to the struts, some of them—mostly tools, vacuum welders and such—trailing along in its wake, giving the sled a raggedy, gypsy look.

"Those explosives you got stashed," Gerald said, staring after the sled.

"They're safe."

"I hope so. We didn't have 'em, they might have moved on us by now. Done a hostage thing. Or maybe just blown something up. I'm pretty sure nothing else has been brought on station, so you just keep a close watch on that shit. That's our hole card."

"I don't like waiting for them to make the first move."

"I know you don't. Was up to you, we'd be stiffening citizens right and left, and figuring out later if they guilty or not. That's how come you got the teeth, and I'm holding the leash."

Though his face was hidden, I knew he was not smiling.

"Your way's not always the right of it, Gerald," I said. "Sometimes my way's the most effective, the most secure."

"Yeah, maybe. But not this time. This is too bullshit, this mess. Too many upper level people involved. We scratch the wrong number off the page, we be down the tube in a fucking flash. You don't want to be scuffling around back on Earth, do you? I sure as hell don't."

"I'd prefer it to having my lungs sucked out through my mouth like Thirwell."

"Would you, now? Me, I'm not so sure. I want a life that's more than just gnawing bones, John. I ain't up to that kind of hustle no more. And I don't believe you are, either."

We stood without speaking for a minute or so. It was getting near time for a shift change, and everywhere bits of silver were lifting from the blotched surface of the station, flocking together in the brilliant beams of light shooting from the transport bays, their movements as quick and fitful as the play of dust in sunlight.

"You're thinking too much these days, man," Gerald said. "You're not sniffing the air, you're not feeling things here." He made a slow, ungainly patting motion above his gut.

"That's rot!"

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"Is it? Listen to this. 'Life has meaning but no theme. There is no truth we can assign to it that does not in some way lessen the bright flash of being that is its essential matter. There is no lesson learned that does not signal a misapprehension of our stars. There is no moral to this darkness.' That's some nice shit. Extremely profound. But the man who wrote that, he's not watching the water for sharks. He's too busy thinking."

"I'm so pleased," I said, "you've been able to access my computer once again. I know the childlike joy it brings you. And I'm quite sure Ernesto is absolutely thrilled at having a peek."

"Practice makes perfect."

"Any further conclusions you've drawn from poking around in my personal files?"

"You got one helluva fantasy life. Or else that Arlie, man, she's about half some kind of beast. How come you write all that sex stuff down?"

"Prurience," I said. "Damn! I don't know why I put up with this shit from you."

"Well, I do. I'm the luckiest Chief of Security in the system, see, 'cause I've got me a big, bad dog who's smart and loyal, and"—he lifted one finger of his gauntleted hand to signify that this was key—"who has no ambition to take my job."

"Don't be too sure."

"No, man, you don't want my job. I mean, you'd accept it if it was handed to you, but you like things the way they are. You always running wild and me trying to cover your ass."

"I hope you're not suggesting that I'm irresponsible."

"You're responsible, all right. You just wouldn't want the kind of responsibility I've got. It'd interfere with your style. The way you move around the station, talking bullshit to the people, everything's smooth, then all of a sudden you go Bam! Bam!, and take somebody down, then the next second you're talking about Degas or some shit, and then, Bam!, somebody else on the floor, you say, Oops, shit, I guess I messed up, will you please forgive me, did I ever tell you 'bout Paris in the springtime when all the poets turn into cherryblossoms, Bam! It's fucking beautiful, man. You got half the people so scared they crawl under the damn rug when they see you coming, and the other half loves you to death, and most all of 'em would swear you're some kind of Robin Hood, you whip 'em 'cause you love 'em and it's your duty, and you only use your powers for goodness and truth. They don't understand you like I do. They don't see you're just a dangerous, amoral son of a bitch."

"Is this the sort of babble that goes into your personnel reports?"

"Not hardly. I present you as a real citizen. A model of integrity and courage and resourcefulness."

"Thanks for that," I said coldly.

"Just don't ever change, man. Don't ever change."

The sleds that had lifted from the station had all disappeared, but others were materializing from the blackness, tiny points of silver and

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light coming home from the assembly platforms, looking no more substantial than the clouds of barnacles. Finally Gerald said, "I got things to take care of." He waved at the barnacles. "Leave this shit alone, will you? After everything else gets settled, maybe then we'll look into it. Right now all you doing is wasting my fucking time."

I watched him moving off along the curve of the module toward the airlock, feeling somewhat put off by his brusque reaction and his analysis. I respected him a great deal as a professional, and his clinical assessment of my abilities made me doubt that his respect for me was so unqualified.

There was a faint click against the side of my helmet. I reached up and plucked off a barnacle. Lying in the palm of my gauntlet, its plates closed, its olive surface threaded with gold and crimson, it seemed cryptic, magical, rare, like something one would find after a search lasting half a lifetime, a relic buried with a wizard king, lying in his ribcage in place of a heart. I had shifted my position so that the light from the port behind me cast my shadow over the surface, and, a neurological change having been triggered by the shift in light intensity, some of the barnacles in the shadow were opening their plates and probing the vacuum with stubby gray "tongues," trying to feed. It was an uncanny sight, the way their "tongues" moved, stiffly, jerkily, like bad animation, like creatures in a grotesque garden hallucinated by Hawthorne or Baudelaire, and standing there among them, with the technological hodgepodge of the station stretching away in every direction, I felt as if I were stranded in a pool of primitive time, looking out onto the future. It was, I realized, a feeling akin to that I'd had in London whenever I thought about the space colonies, the outposts strung across the system.

Gnawing bones.

As my old Classics professor would have said, Gerald's metaphor was "a happy choice."

And now I had time to consider, I realized that Gerald was right: after all the years on Solitaire, I would be ill-suited for life in London, my instincts rusty, incapable of readjusting to the city's rabid intensity. But I did not believe he was right to wait for Samuelson to move against us. Once the Magnificence set their sights on a goal, they were not inclined to use half-measures. I was too disciplined to break ranks with Gerald, but there was nothing to prevent me from preparing myself for the day of judgment. Samuelson might bring us down, I told myself, but I would see to it that he would not outlive us. I was not aware, however, that judgment day was almost at hand.

Perhaps it was the trouble of those days that brought Arlie and I closer together, that reawakened us to the sweetness of our bodies and the sharp mesh of our souls, to all those things we had come to take for granted. And perhaps Bill had something to do with it. As dismal an item as he was, it may be his presence served—as Arlie had suggested—to supply us with some missing essential of warmth or heart.

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But whatever the cause, it was a great good time for us, and I came once again to perceive her not merely as someone who could cure a hurt or make me stop thinking for a while, but as the embodiment of my hopes. After everything I had witnessed, all the shabby, bloody evidence I had been presented of our kind's pettiness and greed, that I could feel anything so pure for another human being. . . . Christ, it astounded me! And if that much could happen, then why not the fulfillment of other, more improbable hopes? For instance, suppose a ship were to return with news of a habitable world. I pictured the two of us boarding, flying away, landing, being washed clean in the struggle of a stern and simple life. Foolishness, I told myself. Wild ignorance. Yet each time I fell into bed with Arlie, though the darkness that covered us seemed always imbued with a touch of black satin, with the sickly patina of the Strange Magnificence, I would sense in the back of my mind that in touching her I was flying away again, and in entering her I was making landfall on some perfect blue-green sphere. There came a night, however, when to entertain such thoughts seemed not mere folly but the height of indulgence.

It was close upon half-eleven, and the three of us, Bill, Arlie, and I, were sitting in the living room, the walls playing a holographic scenario of a white-capped sea and Alps of towering cumulus, with whales breeching and a three-masted schooner coasting on the wind, vanishing whenever it reached a corner, then reappearing on the adjoining wall. Bill and Arlie were on the sofa, and she was telling him stories about Earth, lies about the wonderful animals that lived there, trying to distract him from his obsessive nattering about the barnacles. I had just brought out several of the packet charges that Gerald and I had hidden away, and I was working at reshaping them into smaller units, a project that had occupied me for several nights. Bill had previously seemed frightened by them and had never mentioned them. That night, however, he pointed at the charges and said, " 'Splosives?"

"Very good," I said. "The ones we found, you and I. The ones I was working with yesterday. Remember?"

"Uh-huh." He watched me re-insert a timer into one of the charges and then asked what I was doing.

"Making some presents," I told him.

"Birthday presents?"

"More like Guy Fawkes Day presents."

He had no clue as to the identity of Guy Fawkes, but he nodded sagely as though he had. "Is one for Gerald?"

"You might say they're all for Gerald."

He watched me a while longer, then said, "Why is it presents? Don't 'splosives hurt?"

" 'E's just havin' a joke," Arlie said.

Bill sat quietly for a minute or so, his eyes tracking my fingers, and at last he said, "Why won't you talk to Gerald about the barnacles? You should tell him it's important."

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"Give it a rest, Billy," Arlie said, patting his arm.

"What do you expect Gerald to do?" I said. "Even if he agreed with you, there's nothing to be done."

"Leave," he said. "Like the barnacles."

"What a marvelous idea! We'll just pick up and abandon the place."

"No, no!" he shrilled. "CPC! CPC!"

"Listen 'ere," said Arlie. "There's not a chance in 'ell the corporation's goin' to authorize usin' the CPC for somethin' loike that. So put it from mind, dear, won't you?"

"Don't need the corporation," Bill said in a whiney tone.

"He's got the CPC on the brain," I said. "Every night I come in here and find him running the file."

Arlie shushed me and asked, "What's that you said, Bill?"

He clamped his lips together, leaned back against the wall, his head making a dark, ominous-looking interruption in the path of the schooner; a wave of bright water appeared to crash over him, sending up a white spray.

"You 'ave somethin' to tell us, dear?"

"Be grateful for the silence," I said.

A few seconds later Bill began to weep, to wail that it wasn't fair, that everyone hated him.

We did our best to soothe him, but to no avail. He scrambled to his feet and went to beating his fists against his thighs, hopping up and down, shrieking at the top of his voice, his face gone as red as a squalling infant's. Then of a sudden he clutched the sides of his head. His legs stiffened, his neck cabled. He fell back on the sofa, twitching, screaming, clawing at the lump behind his ear. Mister C had intervened and was punishing him with electric shocks. It was a hideous thing to see, this enormous, babyish man jolted by internal lightnings, strings of drool braiding his chin, the animation ebbing from his face, his protests growing ever more feeble, until at last he sat staring blankly into nowhere, an ugly, outsized doll in a stained white jumpsuit.

Arlie moved close to him, mopped his face with a tissue. Her mouth thinned; the lines bracketing the corners of her lips deepened. "God, 'e's a disgustin' object," she said. "I don't know what it is about 'im touches me so."

"Perhaps he reminds you of your uncle."

"I realize this is hard toimes for you, luv," she said, continuing to mop Bill's face. "But do you really find it necessary to treat me so sarcastic, loike I was one of your culprits?"

"Sorry," I said.

She gave an almost imperceptible shrug. Something shifted in her face, as if an opaque mask had slid aside, revealing her newly vulnerable. "What you fink's goin' to 'appen to 'im?"

"Same as'll happen to us, probably. It appears our fates have become intertwined." I picked up another charge. "Anyway, what's it matter, the poor droob? His best pal is a little black bean that zaps him whenever

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he throws a wobbler. He's universally loathed, and his idea of a happy time is to pop a crystal and flog the bishop all night long. As far as I can tell, his fate's already bottomed out."

She clicked her tongue against her teeth. "Maybe it's us Oi see in 'im."

"You and me? That's a laugh."

"Nao, I mean all of us. Don't it seem sometimes we're all 'elpless loike 'im? Just big, loopy animals without a proper sense of things."

"I don't choose to think that way."

Displeasure came into her face, but before she could voice it, a loud buzzer went off in the bedroom—Gerald's private alarm, a device he would only use if unable to communicate with me openly. I jumped to my feet and grabbed a hand laser from a drawer in the table beside the sofa.

"Don't let anyone in," I told Arlie. "Not under any circumstances."

She nodded, gave me a brisk hug. "You 'urry back."

The corridors of East Louie were thronged, hundreds of people milling about the entrances of the common rooms and the commissaries. I smelled hashish, perfume, pheromone sprays. Desperate with worry, I pushed and elbowed my way through the crowds toward Gerald's quarters, which lay at the opposite end of the module. When I reached his door, I found it partway open and the concerned brown face of Ernesto Carbajal, peering out at me. He pulled me into the foyer. The room beyond was dark; a slant of light fell across the carpet from the bedroom door, which was open a foot or so; but I could make out nothing within.

"Where's Gerald?" I asked.

Carbajal's hands made delicate, ineffectual gestures in the air, as if trying to find a safe hold on something with a lot of sharp edges. "I didn't know what to do," he said. "I didn't know . . . I. . . ."

I watched him flutter and spew. He was Gerald's man, and Gerald claimed he was trustworthy. For my part, I had never formed an opinion. Now, however, I saw nothing that made me want to turn my back on him. And so, of course, I determined that I would do exactly that as soon as a suitable opportunity presented itself.

"You gave the alarm?" I asked him.

"Yes, I didn't want anyone to hear . . . the intercom. You know, it . . . I. . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Calm down!" I pushed him against the wall, kept my hand flat against his chest. "Where's Gerald?"

His eyes flicked toward the bedroom; for an instant the flesh of his face seemed to sag away from the bone, to lose all its firmness. "There," he said. "Back there. Oh, God!"

It was at that moment I knew Gerald was dead, but I refused to let the knowledge affect me. No matter how terrible the scene in the bedroom, Carbajal's reactions—though nicely done—were too flighty for a professional; even considering his involvement with Gerald, he should have been able to manage a more businesslike façade.

"Let's have a look, shall we?"

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"No, I don't want to go back in there!"

"All right, then," I said. "You wait here."

I crossed to the bedroom, keeping an ear out for movement behind me. I swallowed, held my breath. The surface of the door seemed hot to the touch, and when I slid it open, I had the thought that the heat must be real, that all the glare off the slick red surfaces within had permeated the metal. Gerald was lying on the bed, the great crimson hollow of his stomach and chest exposed and empty, unbelievably empty, cave empty, with things like glistening, pulpy red fruit resting by his head, hands and feet; but I did not admit to the sight, I kept a distant focus. I heard a step behind me and turned, throwing up my guard as Carbajal, his face distorted by a grimace, struck at me with a knife. I caught his knife arm, bent the elbow backward against the doorframe; I heard it crack as he screamed and shoved him back into the living room. He staggered off-balance, but did not fall. He righted himself, began to move in a stealthy crouch, keeping his shattered elbow toward me, willing to accept more pain in order to protect his good left hand. Disabled or not, he was still very fast, dangerous with his kicks. But I knew I had him so long as I was careful, and I chose to play him rather than end it with the laser. The more I punished him, I thought, the less resistant he would be to interrogation. I feinted, and when he jumped back, I saw him wince. A chalky wash spread across his skin. Every move he made was going to hurt him.

"You might as well hazard it all on one throw, Ernesto," I told him. "If you don't, you're probably going to fall over before I knock you down."

He continued to circle me, unwilling to waste energy on a response; his eyes looked all dark, brimming with concentrated rage. Passing through the spill of light from the bedroom, he seemed ablaze with fury, a slim little devil with a crooked arm.

"It's not your karate let you down, Ernesto. It's that ridiculous drama queen style of acting. Absolutely vile! I thought you might start beating your breast and crying out to Jesus for succor. Of course that's the weakness all you yobbos in the Magnificence seem to have. You're so damned arrogant, you think you can fool everyone with the most rudimentary tactics. I wonder why that is. Never mind. In a moment I'm going to let you tell me all about it."

I gave him an opening, a good angle of attack. I'm certain he knew it was a trap, but he was in so much pain, so eager to stop the pain, that his body reacted toward the opening before his mind could cancel the order. He swung his right leg in a vicious arc, I stepped inside the kick, executed a hip throw; as he flew into the air and down, I wrenched his good arm out of the socket with a quick twist. He gave a cry, but wriggled out of my reach and bridged to his feet, both arms dangling. I took him back down with a leg sweep and smashed his right kneecap with my heel. Once his screaming had subsided I sat down on the edge of a coffee table and showed him the laser.

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"Now we can talk undisturbed," I said brightly. "I hope you feel like talking, because otherwise. . . ."

He cursed in Spanish, spat toward me.

"I can see there's no fooling you, Ernesto. You obviously know you're not leaving here alive, not after what you've done. But you do have one life choice remaining that might be of some interest. Quickly"—I flourished the laser—"or slowly. What's your pleasure?"

He lay without moving, his chest heaving, blinking from time to time, a neutral expression on his face, perhaps trying to think of something he could tell me that would raise the stakes. His breath whistled in his throat; sweat beaded his forehead. My thoughts kept pulling me back into that red room, and as I sat there the pull became irresistible. I saw it clearly this time. The heart lying on the pillow above Gerald's head, the other organs arranged neatly beside his hands and feet; the darkly crimson hollow with its pale flaps. Things written in blood on the wall. It made me weary to see it, and the most wearisome thing of all was the fact that I was numb, that I felt almost nothing. I knew I would have to rouse myself from this spiritual malaise and go after Samuelson. I could trust no one to help me wage a campaign—quick retaliation was the best chance I had. Perhaps the only chance. The Magnificence had a number of shortcomings. Their arrogance, a crudeness of tactics, an infrastructure that allowed unstable personalities to rise to power. To be truthful, the fear and ignorance of their victims was their greatest strength. But their most pertinent flaw was that they tended to give their subordinates too little autonomy. With Samuelson out of the picture, the rest might very well scatter. And then I realized there was something I could do that would leave nothing to chance.

"Ernesto," I said, "now I've considered it, there's really not a thing you can tell me that I want to know."

"No," he said. "No, I have something. Please!"

I shrugged. "All right. Let's hear it."

"The bosses," he said. "I know where they are."

"The Magnificence, you mean? Those bosses?"

A nod. "Administration. They're all there."

"They're there right this moment?"

Something must have given a twinge, for he winced and said, "*Dios!*" When he recovered he added, "Yes. They're waiting. . . ." Another pain took him away for a moment.

"Waiting for the revolution to be won?" I suggested.

"Yes."

"And just how many bosses are we speaking about?"

"Twenty. Almost twenty, I think."

Christ, I thought, nearly half of the administration gone to black satin and nightmare.

I got to my feet, pocketed the laser.

"Wha. . . ." Ernesto said, and swallowed; his pallor had increased, and I realized he was going into shock. His dark eyes searched my face.

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"I'm going, Ernesto," I said. "I don't have the time to treat you as you did Gerald. But my fervent hope is that someone else with more time on their hands will find you. Perhaps one of your brothers in the Magnificence. Or one of Gerald's friends. Neither, I suspect, will view your situation in a favorable light. And should no one come upon you in the forseeable future, I suppose I shall have to be satisfied with knowing you died a lingering death." I bent to him. "Getting cold, isn't it? You've had the sweet bit, Ernesto. There'll be no more pretending you've a pretty pair of charlies and playing sweet angelina to the hard boys. No more gobble offs for you, dearie. It's all fucking over."

I would have loved to hurt him some more, but I did not believe I would have been able to stop once I got started. I blew him a kiss, told him that if the pain got too bad he could always swallow his tongue, and left him to what would almost certainly be the first of his final misgivings.

When I returned to my quarters Arlie threw her arms about me and held me tight while I gave her the news about Gerald. I still felt nothing. Telling her was like hearing my own voice delivering a news summary.

"I've got work to do," I said. "I can't protect you here. They're liable to pay a visit while I'm away. You'll have to come with me."

She nodded, her face buried in my shoulder.

"We have to go outside," I said. "We can use one of the sleds. Just a short hop over to Administration, a few minutes there, and we're done. Can you manage?"

Arlie liked having something solid underfoot; going outside was a dread prospect for her, but she made no objection.

"What are you intendin'?" she asked, watching me gather the packet charges I had left scattered about the floor.

"Nothing nice," I said, peering under the sofa; I was, it appeared, short four charges. "Don't worry about it."

"Don't you get cheeky with me! Oi'm not some low-heel Sharon you've only just met. Oi've a right to know what you're about."

"I'm going to blow up the damned place," I said, moving the sofa away from the wall.

She stared at me, open-mouthed. "You're plannin' to blow up Admin? 'Ave you done your crust? What you finkin' of?"

I told her about the suspicious files and what Ernesto had said, but this did little to soothe her.

"There's twenty other people livin' in there!" she said. "What about them?"

"Maybe they won't be at home." I pushed the sofa back against the wall. "I'm missing four charges here. You seen 'em?"

"It's almost one o'clock. Some of 'em might be out, Oi grant you. But whether it's twenty or fifteen, you're talkin' about the murder of innocent people."

"Look here," I said, continuing my search, heaving chairs about to bleed off my anger. "First of all, they're not people. They're corporation

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deadlegs. Using the word 'innocent' to describe them makes as much sense as using the word 'dainty' to describe a pig's eating habits. At one time or another they're every one put the drill to some poor Joey's backside and made it bleed. And they'd do it again in a flicker, because that's all they fucking know how to do. Secondly, if they were in my shoes, if they had a chance to rid the station of the Magnificence with only twenty lives lost, they wouldn't hesitate. Thirdly"—I flipped up the cushions on the sofa—"and most importantly, I don't have a bloody choice! Do you understand me? There's no one I can trust to help. I don't have a loyal force with which to lay siege to them. This is the only way I can settle things. I'm not thrilled with the idea of murdering—as you say—twenty people in order to do what's necessary. And I realize it allows you to feel morally superior to think of me as a villain. But if I don't do something soon there'll be hearts and livers strewn about the station like party favors, and twenty dead is going to seem like nothing!" I hurled a cushion into the corner. "Shit! Where are they?"

Arlie was still staring at me, but the outrage had drained from her face. "Oi 'aven't seen 'em."

"Bill," I said, struck by a notion. "Where he'd get to?"

"Bill?"

"Yeah, Bill. The fuckwit. Where is he?"

" 'E's away somewhere," she said. " 'E was in the loo for a while, then Oi went in the bedroom, and when Oi come out 'e was gone."

I crossed to the bathroom, hoping to find the charges there. But when the door slid open, I saw only that the floor was spattered with bright, tacky blood; there was more blood in the sink, along with a kitchen knife, matted hair, handfuls of wadded, becrimsoned paper towels. And something else: a thin black disc about the size of a soy wafer. It took me a while to absorb all this, to put it together with Bill's recent obsessions, and even after I had done so, my conclusion was difficult to credit. Yet I could think of no other explanation that would satisfy the conditions.

"Arlie," I called. "You seen this?"

"Nao, what?" she said, coming up behind me; then: "Holy Christ!"

"That's his implant, isn't it?" I said, pointing to the disc.

"Yeah, I s'pose it is. My God! Why'd he do that?" She put a hand to her mouth. "You don't fink 'e took the charges. . . ."

"The CPC," I said. "He knew he couldn't do anything with Mister C along for the ride, so he cut the bastard out. And now he's gone for the CPC. Jesus! That's just what we needed, isn't it! Another fucking maniac on the loose!"

"It must 'ave 'urt 'im somethin' fierce!" Arlie said wonderingly. "I mean, he 'ad to 'ave done it quick and savage, or else Mister C would 'ave 'ad time to stop 'im. And I never heard a peep."

"I wouldn't worry about Bill if I were you. You think twenty dead's a tragedy? Think what'll happen if he blows the CPC. How many do you

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reckon will be walking between modules when they disengage? How many others will be killed by falling things? By other sorts of accidents?"

I went back into the living room, shouldered my pack; I handed Arlie a laser. "If you see anyone coming after us, use it. Burn them low if that's all you can bear, but burn them. All right?"

She gave a tight, anxious nod and looked down at the weapon in her hand.

"Come on," I said. "Once we get to the airlock we'll be fine."

But I was none too confident of our chances. Thanks to the greed of madmen and the single-mindedness of our resident idiot, it seemed that the chances of everyone on Solitaire were growing slimmer by the second.

I suppose some of you will say at this juncture that I should have known bad things were going to happen, and further will claim that many of the things that did happen might have been forestalled had I taken a few basic precautions and shown the slightest good sense. What possessed me, you might ask, to run out of my quarters leaving explosives scattered about the floor where Bill could easily appropriate them? And couldn't I have seen that his fascination with the CPC might lead to some perilous circumstance? And why had I not perceived his potential for destructiveness? Well, what had possessed me was concern for a friend, the closest to a friend that I had ever known. And as to Bill, his dangerous potentials, he had never displayed any sign that he was capable of enduring the kind of pain he must have endured, or of employing logic sufficiently well so as to plan even such a simple act as he perpetrated. It was desperation, I'm certain, that fathered the plan, and how was I to factor in desperation with the IQ of a biscuit and come up with the sum of that event? No, I reject guilt and credit both. My part in things was simpler than demanded by that complex twist of fate. I was only there, it seems, to finish things, to stamp out a few last fires, and—in the end—to give a name to the demons of that place and time. And yet perhaps there was something in that whole fury of moments that was mine. Perhaps I saw an opportunity to take a step away from the past, albeit a violent step, and moved by a signal of some sort, one too slight to register except in my cells, I took it. I would like to think I had a higher purpose in mind, and was not merely acting out the imperatives of some fierce vanity.

We docked the sled next to an airlock in the administration module, my reasoning being that if we were forced to flee, it would take less time to run back to administration than it would to cycle the CPC airlock; but instead of entering there, we walked along the top of the corridor that connected administration and the CPC, working our way along molded troughs of plastic covered with the greenish silver substrate left by the barnacles, past an electric array, beneath a tree of radiator panels thirty times as tall as a man, and entered the emergency lock at its nether end. There was a sled docked beside it, and realizing that Bill must have used it, I thought how terrified he must have been to cross even that much of

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the void without Mister C to lend him guidance. Before entering, I set the timer of one of the charges in the pack to a half-second delay and stuck it in the hip pouch of my pressure suit. I would be able to trigger the switch with just the touch of my palm against the pouch. A worst case eventuality.

The cameras inside the CPC were functioning, but since there were no security personnel in evidence, I had to assume that the automatic alarms had failed and that—as usual—no one was bothered to monitor the screens. We had not gone twenty feet into the main room when we saw Bill, dressed in a pressure suit, helmet in hand, emerge from behind a plastic partition, one of many which—as I have said—divided the cavernous white space into a maze of work stations. He looked stunned, lost, and when he noticed us he gave no sign of recognition; the side of his neck was covered with dried blood, and he held his head tipped to that side, as one might when trying to muffle pain by applying pressure to the injured spot. His mouth hung open, his posture was slack, and his eyes were bleary. Under the trays of cold light his complexion was splotchy and dappled with the angry red spots of pimples just coming up.

"The explosives," I said. "Where are they? Where'd you put them?"

His eyes wandered up, grazed my face, twitched toward Arlie, and then lowered to the floor. His breath made an ugly glutinous noise.

He was a pitiable sight, but I could not afford pity; I was enraged at him for having betrayed my trust. "You miserable fucking stain!" I said. "Tell me where they are!" I palmed the back of his head with my left hand; with my right I knuckled the ragged wound behind his ear. He tried to twist away, letting out a wail; he put his hands up to his chest and pushed feebly at me. Tears leaked from his eyes. "Don't!" he bawled. "Don't! It hurts!"

"Tell me where the explosives are," I said, "or I'll hurt you worse. I swear to Christ, I won't ever stop hurting you."

"I don't remember!" he whined.

"I take you into my house," I said. "I protect you, I feed you, I wash your messes up. And what do you do? You steal from me." I slapped him, eliciting a shriek. "Now tell me where they are!"

Arlie was watching me, a hard light in her eyes; but she said nothing.

I nodded toward the labyrinth of partitions. "Have a fucking look round, will you? We don't have much time!"

She went off, and I turned again to Bill.

"Tell me," I said, and began cuffing him about the face, not hard, but hurtful, driving him back with the flurries, setting him to stagger and wail and weep. He fetched up against a partition, eyes popped, that tiny pink mouth pursed in a moue. "Tell me," I repeated, and then said it again, said it every time I hit him, "Tell me, tell me, tell me, tell me. . .", until he dropped to his knees, cowering, shielding his head with his arms, and yelled, "Over there! It's over there!"

"Where?" I said, hauling him to his feet. "Take me to it."

I pushed him ahead of me, keeping hold of the neck ring of his suit,

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yanking, jerking, not wanting to give him a second to gather himself, to make up a lie. He yelped, grunted, pleaded, saying, "Don't!", "Stop it!", until at last he bumped and spun round a corner, and there, resting atop a computer terminal, was one of the charges, a red light winking on the timer, signaling that it had been activated. I picked it up and punched in the deactivation code. The read-out showed that fifty-eight seconds had remained before detonation.

"Arlie!" I shouted. "Get back here! Now!"

I grabbed Bill by the neck ring, pulled him close. "Did you set all the timers the same?"

He gazed at me, uncomprehending.

"Answer me, damn you! How did you set the timers?"

He opened his mouth, made a scratchy noise in the back of his throat; runners of saliva bridged between his upper and lower teeth.

My interior clock was ticking down, 53, 52, 51. . . . Given the size of the room, there was no hope of locating the other three charges in less than a minute. I would have risked a goodly sum on the proposition that Bill had been inconsistent, but I was not willing to risk my life.

Arlie came trotting up and smiled. "You found one!"

"We've got fifty seconds," I told her. "Or less. Run!"

I cannot be certain how long it took us to negotiate the distance between where we had stood and the hatch of the administration module; it seemed an endless time, and I kept expecting to feel the corridor shake and sway and tear loose from its fittings, and to go whirling out into the vacuum. Having to drag Bill along slowed us considerably, and I spent perhaps ten seconds longer opening the hatch with my pass key; but altogether, I would guess we came very near to the fifty second limit. And I *am* certain that as I sealed the hatch behind us, that limit was exceeded. Bill had, indeed, proved inconsistent.

As I stepped in through the inner hatch, I found that Admin had been transformed into a holographic rendering of a beautiful starfield spread across a velvety black depth in which—an oddly charming incongruity—fifteen or twenty doors were visible, a couple of them open, slants of white light spilling out, it seemed, from God's office space behind the walls of space and time. We were walking on gas clouds, nebulae, and constellate beings. Then I noticed the body of a woman lying some thirty feet away, blood pooled wide as a table beneath her. No one else was in sight, but as we proceeded toward the airlock, the outlines of the hatch barely perceptible beneath the astronomical display, three men in black gear stepped out from a doorway farther along the passage. I fired at them, as did Arlie, but our aim was off. Strikes of ruby light smoked the starry expanse beside them as they ducked back into cover. I heard shouts, then shouted answers. The next second, as I fumbled with the hatch, laser fire needled from several doorways, pinning us down. Whoever was firing could have killed us easily, but they satisfied themselves by scoring near misses. Above Bill's frightened cries and the sizzle of burning metal, I could hear laughter. I tossed my laser aside and told

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Arlie to do the same. I touched the charge in my hip pouch. I believed if necessary I would be able to detonate it, but the thought made me cold.

A group of men and women, some ten or eleven strong, came along the corridor toward us, Samuelson in the lead. Like the rest, he wore black satin trousers and a blouse of the same material adorned with badges. Creatures, it appeared, wrought from the same mystic stuff as the black walls and ceiling and floor. He was smiling broadly and nodding, as if our invasion were a delightful interlude that he had been long awaiting.

"How kind of you to do your dying with us, John," he said as we came to our feet; they gathered in a semi-circle around us, hemming us in against the hatch. "I never expected to have this opportunity. And with your lady, too. We're going to have such fun together."

"Bet she's a real groaner," said a muscular, black-haired man at his shoulder.

"Well, we'll find out soon enough, won't we?" said Samuelson.

"Try it," said Arlie, "and Oi'll squeeze you off at the knackers!"

Samuelson beamed at her, then glanced at Bill. "And how are you today, sir? What brings you along, I wonder, on this merry outing?"

Bill returned a look of bewilderment that after a moment, infected by Samuelson's happy countenance, turned into a perplexed smile.

"Do me a favor," I said to Samuelson, moving my hand so that the palm was almost touching the switch of the charge at my hip. "There's something I've been yearning to know. Does that gear of yours come with matching underwear? I'd imagine it must. Bunch of ginger-looking poofs and lizzies like you got behind you, I suppose wearing black nasties is *de rigueur*."

"For somebody who's 'bout to major in high-pitched screams," said a woman at the edge of the group, a heavyset blonde with a thick American accent and an indecipherable tattoo on her bicep, "you gotta helluva mouth on you, I give ya that."

"That's just John's unfortunate manner," Samuelson said. "He's not very good at defeat, you see. It should be interesting to watch him explore the boundaries of this particular defeat."

My hand had begun to tremble on the switch; I found myself unable to control it.

"What is it with you, Samuelson?" said the blonde woman. "Every time you chop someone, you gotta play Dracula? Let's just do 'em and get on with business."

There was a brief argument concerning the right of the woman to speak her mind, the propriety of mentally preparing the victim, of "tasting the experience," and other assorted drivel. Under different circumstances, I would have laughed to see how ludicrous and inept a bunch were these demons; I might have thought how their ineptitude spoke to the terminal disarray back on Earth, that such a feeble lot could have gained so much power. But I was absorbed by the trembling of my hand, the sweat trickling down my belly, and the jellied weakness of my legs. I imagined I could feel the cold mass of explosives turning, giving a kick, like a dark

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and fatal child striving to break free of the womb. Before long I would have to reveal the presence of the charge and force a conclusion, one way or another, and I was not sure I was up to it. My hand wanted to slap the switch, pushed against, it seemed, by all the weighty detritus of my violent life.

Finally Samuelson brought an end to the argument. "This is my show, Amy. I'll do as I please. If you want to discuss method during Retreat, I'll be happy to satisfy. Until then, I'd appreciate your full cooperation."

He said all this with the mild ultra-sincerity of a priest settling a squabble among the Ladies Auxiliary concerning a jumble sale; but when he turned to me, all the anger that he must have repressed came spewing forth.

"You naff little scrote!" he shouted. "I'm sick to death of you getting on my tits! When I've done working over your slippery and that great dozy blot beside you, I'm going to paint you red on red."

I did not see what happened at that moment with Arlie. Somebody tried to fondle her, I believe, and there was a commotion beside me, too brief to call a struggle, and then she had a laser in her hand and was firing. A beam of crimson light no thicker than a knitting needle spat from the muzzle and punched its way through the temple of a compact graying man, exiting through the top of his skull, dropping him in a heap. Another beam spitted the shoulder of the blonde woman. All this at close quarters, people shrieking, stumbling, pushing together, nudging me, nearly causing me to set off the charge. Then the laser was knocked from Arlie's hand, and she was thrown to the floor. Samuelson came to stand astraddle her, his laser aimed at her chest.

"Carve the bitch up!" said the blonde woman, holding her shoulder.

"Splendid idea," Samuelson said, adjusting the setting of his laser. "I'll just do a little writing to begin with. Start with an inspirational saying, don't you think? Or maybe"—he chuckled— "John Loves Arlie."

"No," I said, my nerves steadied by this frontal assault; I pulled out the packet charge. "No, you're not going to do that. Because unless you do the right thing, in about two seconds the best part of you is going to be sliding all greasylike down the walls. I'll give you to three to put down your weapons." I drew a breath and tried to feel Arlie beside me. "One." I stared at Samuelson, coming hard at him with all the fire left in me. "You best tell 'em how mad I am for you." I squared my shoulders; I prayed I had the guts to press the switch on three. "That's two."

"Do it!" he said to his people. "Do it now!"

They let their weapons fall.

"Back it off," I said, feeling relief, but also a ghostly momentum as if the count had continued on in some alternate probability and I was now blowing away in fire and ruin. I picked up my pack, grabbed Samuelson by the shirtfront as the rest retreated along the corridor. "Open the hatch," I told Arlie, who had scrambled up from the floor.

I heard her punching out the code, and a moment later, I heard the hatch swing open. I backed around the door, slung Samuelson into the

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airlock, slamming him up against Bill, who had wandered in on his own. At that precise moment, the CPC exploded.

The sound of the explosion was immense, a great wallop of pressure and noise that sent me reeling into the airlock, reeling and floating up, the artificial gravity systems no longer operative; but what was truly terrifying was the vented hiss that followed the explosion, signaling disengagement from the connecting corridors, and the sickening sway of the floor, and then the roar of ignition as the module's engines transformed what had been a habitat into a ship. I pictured the whole of Solitaire coming apart piece by piece, each one igniting and moving off into the nothing, little glowing bits, like the break-up of an electric reef.

Arlie had snatched up one of the lasers and she was now training it at Samuelson, urging him into his pressure suit—a difficult chore considering the acceleration. But he was managing. I helped Bill on with his helmet and fitted mine in place just as the boost ended and we drifted free. Then I broke the seal on the outer hatch, started the lock cycling.

Once the lock had opened, I told Arlie she would have to drive the sled. I watched as she fitted herself into the harness of the rocket pack, then I lashed Samuelson to one of the metal struts, Bill to another. I set the charge I had been carrying on the surface of the station, took two more out of the pack. I set the timers for ninety seconds. I had no thought in my head as I was doing this; I might have been a technician stripping a wire, a welder joining a seam. Yet as I prepared to activate the charges, I realized that I was not merely ridding the station of the Strange Magnificence, but of the corporation's personnel. I had, of course, known this before, but I had not understood what it meant. Within a month, probably considerably less, the various elements of the station would reunite, and when they did, for the first time in our history, Solitaire would be a free place, without a corporate presence to strike the fear of God and Planet Earth into the hearts and minds of the workers. Oh, it was true, some corporates might have been in other modules when the explosion occurred, but most of them were gone, and the survivors would not be able to wield much power; it would be six months at least before their replacements arrived and a new administration could be installed. A lot could happen in that time. My comprehension of this was much less linear than I am reporting; it came to me as a passion, a hope, and as I activated the timers, I had a wild sense of freedom that, though I did not fathom it then, seems now to have been premonitory and inspired.

I lashed and locked myself on to a strut close to Arlie and told her to get the hell gone, pointing out as a destination the web of a transport dock that we were passing. I did not see the explosion, but I saw the white flare of it in Arlie's faceplace as she turned to watch; I kept my eyes fixed for a time on the bits and pieces of Solitaire passing silently around us, and when I turned to her, as the reflected fire died away and her eyes were revealed, wide and lovely and dark, I saw no hatred in her, no disgust. Perhaps she had already forgiven me for being the man I was. Not kindly, and yet not without kindness. Merely someone who

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had learned to do the necessary and to live with it. Someone whose past had burned a shadow that stretched across his future.

I told her to reverse the thrusters and stop the sled. There was one thing left to do, though I was not so eager to have done with it as once I had been. Out in the dark, in the nothing, with all those stars pointing their hot eyes at you and trying to spear your mind with their secret colors, out in that absolute desert the questions of villainy and heroism grow remote. The most terrible of sins and the sweetest virtues often become compressed in the midst of all that sunless cold; compared to the terrible inhumanity of space, they both seem warmly human and comprehensible. And thus when I approached the matter of ending Samuelson's life I did so without relish, without the vindictive spirit that I might have expressed had we been back on Solitaire.

I inched my way back to where I had tied him and locked on to a strut; I trained the laser on the plastic rope that lashed him to the sled and burned it through. His legs floated up, and he held on to a strut with his gauntleted hands.

"Please, God! Don't!" he said, the panic in his voice made tinny and comical by my helmet speaker; he stared down through the struts that sectioned off the void into which he was about to travel—silver frames each enclosing a rectangle of unrelieved black, some containing a few scraps of billion-year-old light. "Please!"

"What do you expect from me?" I asked. "What do you expect from life? Mercy? Or the accolade? Here." I pointed at the sweep of stars and poetry, the iron puzzle of the dock beginning to loom, to swell into a massive crosshatching of girders, each strung with white lights, with Mars a phantom crescent below and the sun a yellow coal. "You longed for God, didn't you? Where is He if not here? Here's your strange magnificence." I gestured with the laser. "Push off. Hard. If you don't push hard enough, we'll come after you and give you a nudge. You can open your faceplate whenever you want it to end."

He began to plead, to bargain. "I can make you wealthy," he said. "I can get you back to Earth. Not London. Nova Sibersk. One of the towers."

"Of course you can," I said. "And I would be a wise man, indeed, to trust that promise, now wouldn't I?"

"There are ways," Samuelson said. "Ways to guarantee it. It's not that difficult. Really. I can. . . ."

"Thirwell smiled at me," I reminded him. "He sang. Are your beliefs so shallow you won't even favor us with a tune?"

"Do you want me to sing? Do you want me to be humiliated? If that's what it'll take to get you to listen to me, I'll do it. I'll do anything."

"No," I said. "That's not what I want."

His eyes were big with the idea of death. I knew what he was feeling: all his life was suddenly thrilling, precious, new; and he was almost made innocent by the size and intensity of his fear, almost cleansed and converted by the knowledge that all this sensey splendor was about to

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go on forever and ever without him. It was a hard moment, and he did not do well by it.

When he began to weep I burned a hole in his radio housing to silence him. He put a hand up to shield his face, fearing I would burn the helmet; I kicked his other hand loose from the sled, sending him spinning away slowly, head over heels toward the sun, a bulky white figure growing toylike and clever against the black ground of his future, like one of those little mechanical monkeys that spins round and round on a plastic bar. I knew he would never open his faceplate—the greater the villain, the greater their inability to accept fate. He would be a long time dying.

I checked on Bill—he was sleeping!—and returned to my place beside Arlie. We boosted again toward the dock. I thought about Gerald, about the scattered station, about Bill, but I could not concentrate on them. It was as if what I saw before me had gone inside my skull, and my mind was no longer a storm of electric impulse, but an immense black emptiness lit by tiny stars and populated by four souls, one of whom was only now beginning to know the terrible loneliness of his absent god.

We entrusted Bill to the captain of the docked transport, *Steel City,* a hideous name for a hideous vessel, pitted and gray and ungainly in form, like a sad leviathan. There was no going back to Solitaire for Bill. They had checked the recordings taken in the CPC, and they knew who had been responsible for the break-up of the station, for the nearly one hundred and thirty lives that had been lost, for the billions in credit blown away. Even under happier circumstances, without Mister C to guide him, he would not be able to survive. Nor would he survive on Earth. But there he would at least have a slight chance. The corporation had no particular interest in punishing him. They were not altogether dissatisfied with the situation, being pleased to learn that their failsafe system worked, and they would, they assured us, see to it that he was given institutional care. I knew what that portended. Shunted off to some vast dark building with a Catholic statue centering a seedy garden out front, and misplaced, lost among the howling damned and terminally feeble, and eventually, for want of any reason to do otherwise, going dark himself, lying down and breathing, perhaps feeding from time to time, for a while, and then, one day, simply giving up, giving out, going away on a rattle of dishes on the dinner cart or a wild cry ghosting up from some nether region or a shiver of winter light on a cracked linoleum floor, some little piece of brightness to which he could attach himself and let go of the rest. It was horrible to contemplate, but we had no choice. Back on the station he would have been torn apart.

The *Steel City* was six hours from launching inbound when Arlie and I last saw Bill. He was in a cell lit by a bilious yellow tray of light set in the ceiling, wearing a gray ship's jumpsuit; his wound had been dressed, and he was clean, and he was terrified. He tried to hold us, he pleaded with us to take him back home, and when we told him that was impossible, he sat cross-legged on the floor, rocking back and forth, humming a

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tune that I recognized as "Barnacle Bill the Spacer." He had apparently forgotten its context and the cruel words. Arlie kneeled beside him and told stories of the animals he would soon be seeing. There were tigers sleek as fire, she said, and elephants bigger than small towns, and birds faster than rain, and wolves with mysterious lights in their eyes. There were serpents too, she said, green ones with ruby tongues that told the most beautiful stories in the world, and cries so musical had been heard in the Mountains of the Moon that no one dared seek out the creature who had uttered them for fear of being immolated by the sight of such beauty, and the wind, she said, the wind was also an animal, and to those who listened carefully to it, it would whisper its name and give them a ride around the world in a single day. Birds as bright as the moon, great lizards who roared when it thundered as if answering questions, white bears with golden claws and magical destinies. It was a wonderland to which he was traveling, and she expected him to call and tell us all the amazing things that he would do and see.

Watching them, I had a clearer sense of him than ever before. I knew he did not believe Arlie, that he was only playing at belief, and I saw in this his courage, the stubborn, clean drive to live that had been buried under years of abuse and denial. He was not physically courageous, not in the least, but I for one knew how easy that sort of courage was to sustain, requiring only a certain careless view of life and a few tricks to inspire a red madness. And I doubted I could have withstood all he had suffered, the incessant badgering and humiliation, the sharp rejection, the sexual defeats, the monstrous loneliness. Years of it. Decades. God knows, he had committed an abysmal stupidity, but we had driven him to it, we had menaced and tormented him, and in return—an act of selfishness and desperation, I admit, yet selfishness in its most refined form, desperation in its most gentle incarnation—he had tried to save us, to make us love him.

It is little enough to know of a man or a woman, that he or she has courage. Perhaps there might have been more to know about Bill had we allowed him to flourish, had we given his strength levers against which to test itself and thus increase. But at the moment knowing what I knew seemed more than enough, and it opened me to all the feelings I had been repressing, to thoughts of Gerald in particular. I saw that my relationship with him—in fact most of my relationships—were similar to the one I'd had with Bill; I had shied away from real knowledge, real intimacy. I felt like weeping, but the pity of it was, I would only be weeping for myself.

Finally it was time for us to leave. Bill pawed us, gave us clumsy hugs, clung to us, but not so desperately as he might have; he realized, I am fairly certain, that there would be no reprieve. And, too, he may not have thought he deserved one. He was ashamed, he believed he had done wrong, and so it was with a shameful attitude, not at all demanding, that he asked me if they would give him another implant, if I would help him get one.

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"Yeah, sure, Bill," I said. "I'll do my best."

He sat back down on the floor, touched the wound on his neck. "I wish he was here," he said.

"Mister C?" said Arlie, who had been talking to a young officer; he had just come along to lead us back to our sled. "Is that who you're talkin' about, dear?"

He nodded, eyes on the floor.

"Don't you fret, luv. You'll get another friend back 'ome. A better one than Mister C. One what won't 'urt you."

"I don't mind he hurts me," Bill said. "Sometimes I do things wrong."

"We all of us do wrong, luv. But it ain't always necessary for us to be 'urt for it."

He stared up at her as if she were off her nut, as if he could not imagine a circumstance in which wrong was not followed by hurt.

"That's the gospel," said the officer. "And I promise, we'll be takin' good care of you, Bill." He had been eyefucking Arlie, the officer had, and he was only saying this to impress her with his humanity. Chances were, as soon as we were out of sight, he would go to kicking and yelling at Bill. Arlie was not fooled by him.

"Goodbye, Bill," she said, taking his hand, but he did not return her pressure, and his hand slipped out of her grasp, flopped onto his knee; he was already retreating from us, receding into his private misery, no longer able to manufacture a brave front. And as the door closed on him, that first of many doors, leaving him alone in that sickly yellow space, he put his hands to the sides of his head as if his skull could not contain some terrible pain, and began rocking back and forth, and saying, almost chanting the words, like a bitter monk his hopeless litany, "Oh, no . . . oh, no . . . oh, no. . . ."

Some seventy-nine hours after the destruction of the CPC and the dispersal of Solitaire, the lightship *Perseverance* came home . . . came home with such uncanny accuracy, that had the station been situated where it should have been, the energies released by the ship's re-entry from the supraluminal would have annihilated the entire facility and all on board. The barnacles, perhaps sensing some vast overload of light through their photophores . . . the barnacles and an idiot man had proved wiser than the rest of us. And this was no ordinary homecoming in yet another way, for it turned out that the voyage of the *Perseverance* had been successful. There was a new world waiting on the other side of the nothing, unspoiled, a garden of possibility, a challenge to our hearts and a beacon to our souls.

I contacted the corporation. They, of course, had heard the news, and they also recognized that had Bill not acted the *Perseverance* and all aboard her would have been destroyed along with Solitaire. He was, they were delighted to attest, a hero, and they would treat him as such. How's that, I asked. Promotions, news specials, celebrations, parades, was their answer. What he really wants, I told them, is to come back to Solitaire.

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Well, of course, they said, we'll see what we can do. When it's time, they said. We'll do right by him, don't you worry. How about another implant, I asked. Absolutely, no problem, anything he needs. By the time I broke contact, I understood that Bill's fate would be little different now he was a hero than it would have been when he was a mere fool and a villain. They would use him, milk his story for all the good it could do them, and then he would be discarded, misplaced, lost, dropped down to circulate among the swirling masses of the useless, the doomed and the forgotten.

Though I had already—in concert with others—formed a plan of action, it was this duplicity on the corporation's part that hardened me against them, and thereafter I threw myself into the implementation of the plan. A few weeks from now, the *Perseverance* and three other starships soon to be completed will launch for the new world. Aboard will be the population of Solitaire, minus a few unsympathetic personnel who have been rendered lifeless, and the populations of other, smaller stations in the asteroid belt and orbiting Mars. Solitaire itself, and the other stations, will be destroyed. It will take the corporation decades, perhaps a century, to rebuild what has been lost, and by the time they are able to reach us, we hope to have grown strong, to have fabricated a society free of corporations and Strange Magnificences, composed of those who have learned to survive without the quotas and the dread consolations of the Earth. It is an old dream, this desire to say, No more, Never again, to build a society cleansed of the old compulsions and corruptions, the ancient, vicious ways, and perhaps it is a futile one, perhaps the fact that men like myself, violent men, men who will do the necessary, who will protect against all enemies with no thought for moral fall-out, must be included on the roster, perhaps this pre-ordains that it will fail. Nevertheless, it needs to be dreamed every so often, and we are prepared to be the dreamers.

So that is the story of Barnacle Bill. My story, and Arlie's as well, yet his most of all, though his real part in it, the stuff of his thoughts and hopes, the pain he suffered and the fear he overcame, those things can never be told. Perhaps you have seen him recently on the HV, or even in person, riding in an open car at the end of a parade with men in suits, eating an ice and smiling, but in truth he is already gone into history, already part of the past, already half-forgotten, and when the final door has closed on him, it may be that his role in all this will be reduced to a mere footnote or simply a mention of his name, the slightest token of a life. But I will remember him, not in memorial grace, not as a hero, but as he was, in all his graceless ways and pitiable form. It is of absolute importance to remember him thus, because that, I have come to realize, the raw and the deformed, the ugly, the miserable miracles of our days, the unalloyed baseness of existence, that is what we must learn to love, to accept, to embrace, if we are to cease the denials that weaken us, if we are ever to admit our dismal frailty and to confront the natural terror and heartbreak weather of our lives and live like a strong light across the sky instead of retreating into darkness.

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The barnacles have returned to Solitaire. Or rather, new colonies of barnacles have attached to the newly re-united station, not covering it completely, but dressing it up in patches. I have taken to walking among them, weeding them as Bill once did; I have become interested in them, curious as to how they perceived a ship coming from light years away, and I intend to carry some along with us on the voyage and make an attempt at a study. Yet what compels me to take these walks is less scientific curiosity than a kind of furious nostalgia, a desire to remember and hold the center of those moments that have so changed the direction of our lives, to think about Bill and how it must have been for him, a frightened lump of a man with a clever voice in his ear, alone in all that daunting immensity, fixing his eyes on the bright clots of life at his feet. Just today Arlie joined me on such a walk, and it seemed we were passing along the rim of an infinite dark eye flecked with a trillion bits of color, and that everything of our souls and of every other soul could be seen in that eye, that I could look down to Earth through the haze and scum of the ocean air and see Bill where he stood looking up and trying to find us in that mottled sky, and I felt all the eerie connections a man feels when he needs to believe in something more than what he knows is real, and I tried to tell myself he was all right, walking in his garden in Nova Sibersk, taking the air with an idiot woman so beautiful it nearly made him wise. But I could not sustain the fantasy. I could only mourn, and I had no right to mourn, having never loved him—or if I did, even in the puniest of ways, it was never his person I loved, but what I had from him, the things awakened in me by what had happened. Just the thought that I could have loved him, maybe that was all I owned of right.

We were heading back toward the East Louie airlock, when Arlie stooped and plucked up a male barnacle. Dark green as an emerald, it was, except for its stubby appendage. Glowing like magic, alive with threads of color like a potter's glaze.

"That's a rare one," I said. "Never saw one that color before."

"Bill would 'ave fancied it," she said.

"Fancied, hell. He would have hung the damned thing about his neck."

She set it back down, and we watched as it began working its way across the surface of the barnacle patch, doing its slow, ungainly cartwheels, wobbling off-true, lurching in flight, nearly missing its landing, but somehow making it, somehow getting there. It landed in the shadow of some communications gear, stuck out its tongue and tried to feed. We watched it for a long, long while, with no more words spoken, but somehow there was a little truth hanging in the space between us, in the silence, a poor thing not worth naming, and maybe not even having a name, it was such an infinitesimal slice of what was, and we let it nourish us as much as it could, we took its luster and added it to our own. We sucked it dry, we had its every flavor, and then we went back inside arm in arm, to rejoin the lie of the world. ●

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Somewhat Remarkable

The Remarkables
By Robert Reed
Bantam, $4.99 (paper)

It's almost always unfair to say a book reminds one of another book since it's usually only superficially so and in most cases pure coincidence to boot. However, at times it does help in communicating the general "feel" of a novel, so I will be unfair and say that Robert Reed's *The Remarkables* reminds me in a slight way of Dan Simmons's *Hyperion*. (Obviously there are worse books to be compared to.) In each, a miscellaneous group of humans from a universe of incredible diversity make a "pilgrimage" to a "forbidden" or hitherto closed or secretive planet. The mysteries, dangers, and ambiguities of the situation disclose the characters of the humans as well as revealing the mysteries of the world on which they travel.

Reed's inhabited universe consists of "the Realm," a globe of inhabited space twenty light years across, containing more than a trillion, trillion humans. Notice I say "inhabited space" because it is Reed's marvelous conceit (so simple when you think about it) that you don't need a sun to build a habitable world if you have the necessary energies. (Terraforming is a major occupation for a large percentage of humans.) So the Realm is billions of large and small worlds scattered through space, artificially constructed or terraformed planets and comets, and *not* necessarily in systems.

Only once has another intelligent race been found. This happened first when humanity was still expanding by exploring for habitable worlds rather than building its own, and it was found by the last exploratory vessel, the *Pitcairn*. Though lost, the ship did make planetfall and its crew and colonists survived. The inhabitants of Pitcairn (as the planet was named) were at first glance great tree-like beings (called Remarkables by their human discoverers) that live in groupings along the shore, resembling the mangrove swamps of earth. But as the narrator of the books notes, the resemblance is superficial. The individuals on closer examination look like giant squid planted in the ground with the central mouth surrounded by tentacles of various functions. They lived in symbiosis with a nonsapient humanoidlike animal which provided food (the Remarkables are carnivorous) and protection for the groves. The human survivors of the *Pitcairn* soon took over the symbiotic relationship

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with the giant aliens and so the culture remained until rediscovered by expanding humanity, now civilized enough to respect the strange symbiosis that the stranded humans have become involved in and to concede ownership of the world to the Remarkables. They in turn allow few people and no influence from the Realm on their planet.

The alien young are mobile (resembling purple tumbleweeds) and must make a passage into the interior from their shore grove called a "pilgrimage." There is immense danger because there is no peace among the groves, and all effort will be made to kill the young Remarkables and their Pitcairn human symbiotes. The novel chronicles one such journey—one that turns into a particularly special one for the future of the planet. On it, one learns about the culture of the Remarkables and the culture of the Pitcairn humans. One also learns about those Realm humans who have been allowed to go along on the journey—as viewed by one of them (with short chapters interjected by the brightest of the Remarkable youngsters). It's all well worked out indeed, but for this reader kept falling short—somehow I could never really care about any of the various factions, none of which is exactly winning. But it's balanced by Reed's original and quite breathtaking conception of a systemless inhabited universe.

China Mountain High

China Mountain Zhang
By Maureen F. McHugh
Tor, $19.95 (hardcover)

One subject this column (and SF in general, for that matter) doesn't go into very often is contemporary politics, which could say something about the SF/fantasy aficionado mentality, but that's somebody else's doctoral thesis. Still, I have to at least mention the new world order in connection with Maureen F. McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang*, if only to justify one aspect of it. Only a year or so ago, the "death" of Communism was celebrated by zillions of middle-Europeans pouring into the streets singing the Ruritanian equivalent of "Ding, dong, the witch is dead." Amidst all the general brouhaha then and since, it seems to be forgotten that a huge percentage of the world's population still lives under Communism in a country called China, and the report of its death has been greatly exaggerated.

This is relevant to the new novel because it takes place in a future (of a couple of centuries hence) dominated by Communist China, and those who dismiss Communism as a lost cause should think again. In any case, so much for current politics. As for future politics . . . well, those readers panting for space battles or sophomoric cyberpunk decadence can stop right here. However, if you're interested in an astonishing tour de force of a meticulously worked out future as a background for the lives of a handful of people who are very obviously products of this society, all I can say is that in no way in the space I have here can I do it justice. McHugh has done a stunning job of combining Confucian tradition, extrapolated future Communist doctrine, and ad-

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vanced technology (peripheral, but solid) to show us a world that China dominates. A world in which the U.S. has gone so far down the tubes economically that a second American Revolution has taken place, and where Mars is marginally colonized. She is particularly good at evoking the "small" aspects of a culture: fashion (and its variations from mainstream China to hick America), furniture and decor, games, party talk, subcultures.

And the people? The title is the name of the major character—China Mountain Zhang, more correctly Zhong Shan Zhang, a real downer since Zhong Shan is a variant of Sun-Yat Sen, and, as he points out, it's like being named Karl Marx Johnson. To make matters worse, while he is more or less officially ABC (American Born Chinese), his mother was really Hispanic (officially recorded as Filipino) and he's also known as Rafael Luis. He is from Brooklyn, and we follow the course of his life as he climbs through the tortuous complexity of the official educational system. This system takes him to a mainland China university by way of Baffin Bay (Canada and Australia have united and are independent, but need Sino-American expertise). The fact that he is homosexual ("bent," in officialese) is just another factor of his life as we see it, adding a glimpse into a subculture of a very Puritanical society. (Pornophobes, panic not—we are given aspects of his social and emotional life, but no vivid sexual descriptions.)

Alternating with the chapters chronicling Zhang's career are chapters dealing with a diverse handful of people whose lives touch his, usually only tangentially: the middle-aged woman who has settled on Mars and is trying to raise goats (sounds funny? try and raise goats in an artificial ecosystem); the new, displaced settler she takes in and eventually marries (and whom Zhang tutors by long distance as the settler tries for *his* degree—four questions an hour with the transmission time delay); the human kite flier who participates in the most popular sport of the age—kite racers share their races with a jacked-in audience; San-Xiang (Three Fragrances), the ugly daughter of Zhang's first boss, a disgraced Chinese executive who tries to marry his daughter off to Zhang.

This is a rich and amazingly intelligent novel, essentially plotless but drawing a portrait of a time, a place, and characters that will absolutely convince you of their reality.

Illusory Fantasy

Illusion

By Paula Volsky
Bantam, $22 (hardcover), $10 (paperback)

There will now be a test. With what historical time and place do you associate the following? A weak and doltish king married to a foreign woman who creates a reputation for frivolous spendthriftiness (that's a word?) and whose best friend is a princess of the realm? An aristocratic elite pampered beyond all precedent who regard the rest of the population as distinctly subhuman? That population brought to revolution by sev-

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eral hard winters, a lack of food, and the excesses of the worst of the elite, who treat the public as cattle? A popular revolution, fomented and led by pamphleteers and social philosophers who are soon at odds among themselves? The monarchs virtually held prisoner for a considerable period in their huge palace as more and more of the aristocracy are subjected to indignities by the revolutionaries, eventually culminating in a reign of terror in which dozens are killed every day, brought to the place of execution in tumbrels?

Wrong. Not Paris. Not the seventeen-eighties. The place is Shereen, chief city of Vonahr. The king is Dunulas XIII, his flibbertigibbet queen, Lallazay. Our heroine is the Exalted Eliste vo Derivalle (Volsky has a wonderful way with nomenclature), who has just come to court to be Maid of Honor to the queen under the protection of her kinswoman, Zeralenn, the Countess vo Rouvignac, former mistress to *two* kings. Eliste arrives in Shereen just as the storm is about to break, and goes through all sorts of harrowing adventures as her class is set upon by the common folk.

So we have *Orphans of the Storm* with an aristo heroine and now must ask a qustion that I seem to be asking more and more lately. Where's the fantasy? Well, the "Exalted," i.e., the nobility, are supposedly the heirs of a certain class with talents for magical illusion (very unspecified—the powers also seem to include a bit of telepathic manipulation and the operation of magically powered machines). These talents have pretty much dissipated. Only a few of the Exalted have them—Eliste hasn't a shred, though her reclusive uncle has devoted his life to the development of his own considerable powers.

Early into the story, this relative helps a male servant of their family, who has been brought up as Eliste's foster brother, to escape the wrath of her aristocratically malicious father. Later, during the terror of the Revolution, several forgotten magical machines are resuscitated by the Robespierre surrogate: one, with a lot of bells and whistles, replaces the guillotine (more tidily, but no more efficiently); one gathers information with tiny insectoid offspring, replacing the Revolutionary information service, etc. And of course, reclusive uncle emerges again to save the day, as well as Eliste and her commoner love. But *Illusion*'s fantasy content is hardly the dominant factor of the novel, and historical fiction readers will probably have more fun with the book (the early court scenes are dazzling) than diehard fantasists.

Hardware Star

Painted Space

By John Berkey
Friedlander Publishing Group (740 Washington Rd., Pittsburgh, PA 15228), $19.95 (paper)

Aficionados will know artist John Berkey not only from his non pareil hardware covers, but from his work on non-fiction science publishing and various Hollywood assignments. But it's his monstrous and monstrously detailed machines, usually on or over somber otherworld landscapes, that

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one associates with his realistic canvases.

Painted Space (nice title) is a collection of these and various less typical paintings that should more than please the visual connoisseur of hardware. Here are spaceships galore, abristle with turrets, antennae, and all those things that extrude from space vessels these days. (Remember when spaceships were as streamlined as the Superchief?) Particularly effective are the pull out "Space Colony" and "Space Habitat," a view through the transparent top of a verdant municipality floating in the void. Fans of Vallejo-type work stand warned, this is strictly heavy metal (as in steel, not musical or philosophical) SF. The only pectoral in sight is King Kong's, in an atypical poster done for the film.

Early Frost

The Face in the Frost

By John Bellairs
Collier, $4.95 (paper)

John Bellairs' *The Face In the Frost* can hardly be described as a masterpiece of fantasy, though it's a very good one. However, back when it was published (in 1969), it was downright memorable, because at that time, hard to believe though it may be, fantasy was a rare genre indeed. There was Tolkien (just catching on with the college crowd), and the very rare other adult novels (Fletcher Pratt's *The Well of the Unicorn*), there were the hard-to-find classics such as Dunsany, and there were the distinguished "juveniles" such as the Narnia series. Now that we're up to our Aslan in fantasy, it seems incredible that the publication of an "adult" fantasy was a real rarity.

The Face in the Frost holds up well. Chronicling the accomplishments of a pair of sorcerers (Prospero—no relation—and Roger Bacon —no relation) battling an evil member of their brotherhood, Bellairs brings (brought, one should say) a distinctly sophisticated tone to what has become an all-too-naïve genre. There is everything from the humor of a sharp-tongued magic mirror to some distinctly nightmarish sequences, and it makes one realize just how much alike most of today's fantasies are. There is arguably as much room in fantasy for variety as there is in SF—now we just need some original authors, some brave publishers, and a readership willing to try something different (yes, that's *you* I'm talking about).

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc. . . . Shock Rock is billed at the "first ever rock and roll horror collection," which, according to the publicity, makes explicit the connection between rock music and horror fiction for the first time (?). The editor is Jeff Gelb and the foreword is by the lovely and talented Alice Cooper (Pocket Books, $4.99, paper).

SF/Fantasy non-fiction . . . Can you resist adding to your library the newly published biography of Anne Rice, titled *Prism of the Night*? It is by Katherine Ramsland, who is characterized by the publicity material as a psychologist and philosopher and who, it is noted, conducted interviews with eighty people for the book. She has written for *Psychology Today*,

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among other things (Dutton, $22.95).

Sequels, prequels, series and whatnot . . . Guy Gavriel Kay's "Fionavar Tapestry" trilogy has an unlucky publishing history. The three were done in hard-cover and proved to be, though starting off derivatively, high fantasy of a high order. Through some Byzantine quirk of publishing, only the first two were done in paperback, to the undoubted frustration of quite a few readers. Now another publisher has started all over again with the first, *The Summer Tree*, and let's hope that they make it through all three this time (ROC, $4.99, paper) . . . In 1957, Gordon Dickson wrote a novelette called "St. Dragon and the George," from the title of which you can guess that it was a world where humans were monstrosities and dragons were heroic. It was one of the first of the whimsical fantasies in which we are now awash, and one of the best. The quality was maintained in the novel made from it, *The Dragon and the George*, and only now, believe it or not in this world of instant sequels, has Dickson done a followup, *The Dragon Knight* (Tor, $5.99, paper) . . . *Hellflower* by Eluki bes Shahar was a real romp with authentic wit and science fictional invention. The second Hellflower book, *Darktraders,* is now out and the further adventures of Tiggy, Butterfly St. Cyr, and the Al Paladin are more fun (DAW, $4.50, paper). . . . The third "Tek" book by William Shatner, actor, has appeared; it's called *Teklab*. We noted about the first: "Pretty good for an actor." In this one, he gives credit to "the team" in football terms, in which Ron Goulart is listed as center, so one assumes that Mr. Shatner has had a little help from his friends (Ace/Putnam, $19.95).

Reprints etc. . . . Vernor Vinge's *Across Realtime* brings together his three connected stories, *The Peace War*, the shorter "The Ungoverned," and *Marooned In Realtime* in one volume for the first time (Baen, $5.99, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, 1393 Rue La Fontaine, Montréal, Québec, H2L 1T6, Canada. ●

NEXT ISSUE

(From page 103)

ALSO IN AUGUST: Hugo-winner **Mike Resnick** returns with his latest Kirinyaga story, a disturbing look at the deadly conflict between "The Lotus and the Spear"; **David Smeds** spins a hard-edged tale of crime and retribution in a high-tech future, in "Reef Apes"; Nebula-winner **Geoffrey A. Landis** gives us a compelling look at the day *before* The End Of It All, in "Impact Parameters"; new writer Diane de Avalle-Arce makes her *IAsfm* debut with a funny and very strange little story all about "Bats"; and veteran author **Tom Purdom** returns with a bittersweet and powerful "Chamber Story" that shows us that the old passions still burn under the skin in even the most refined and civilized of futures. Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our August issue on sale on your newsstands on June 23, 1992.

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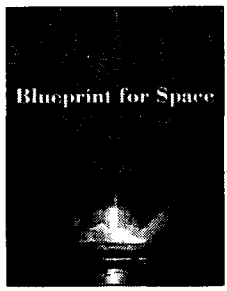

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

I've listed a number of specialized and national conventions this time. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When calling cons (early evening's good), give your name and reason for calling right off. When writing, enclose an SASE. Look for me behind the Filthy Pierre badge, making music.

MAY 1992

29-31—**New Zealand National Con.** For info, write: **Box 11-559, Wellington New Zealand.** Or phone: **(703) 273-3297** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Wellington New Zealand (if city omitted, same as in address) at the West Plaza Hotel. Guests will include: Guest of Honor Joe.

29-31—**ConAmazoo. (616) 963-7050.** Stouffer Hotel, Battle Creek MI. Jody Lynn Nye, Bill Fawcett.

29-31—**Dixie Trek. (404) 325-0000.** Sheraton Century City Hotel, Atlanta GA. Star Trek: TNG con.

JUNE 1992

5-7—**SF and Fantasy Festival. (504) 837-7399.** Clarion Hotel, New Orleans LA. Donaldson, Cherry.

5-7—**Ad Astra. (416) 454-5499.** Sheraton East, Toronto ON. Kurtz, Bujold, Finder, G. G. Kay, Huff.

5-7—**ThunderCon. (405) 737-7051.** Central Plaza, Oklahoma City OK. Majel B. Roddenberry. SF media.

5-7—**Australasian National Media Con.** Hotel Adelaide, Adelaide Australia. N. Gaiman. SF media.

12-14—**XCon, Box 7, Milwaukee WI 53201. (414) 444-8888.** M. Lackey, Coltrain, Spelman, L. Dixon.

12-14—**ConFuse, % Carina Bjorklind, Troskareg. 53, Linkoping S-58330, Sweden. (+46 13) 214-600.**

19-21—**ConCerto, 17 Lewis Ave. #3, E. Lansdowne PA 19050. (215) 623-1139.** SF folksinging con.

19-21—**Fantasy Fair, 4175 Eliza Ct., Lithonia GA 30058. (404) 985-1230.** Atlanta GA. SF media.

19-21—**Protoplasm, 1 Shoesmith Ct., Merchants Place, Reading Berks. RH1 1DT, UK.** Manchester UK.

19-21—**Stoker Awards, Box 10901, Greensboro NC 27404.** New York NY. Horror Writers of America.

19-21—**ConFlagration, 12345 Lake City Way #2001, Seattle WA 98125. (206) 527-2001.** Union WA.

27-28—**Tolcon, % Epstein, RD 2, Carmel NY 10512.** For Tolkien fans. No more on this at press time.

27-28—**Wilfcon, % Mullin, 6-69 Donald, Kitchener ON N2B 3G6. (519) 743-9485.** Canadian natl. con.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3-7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The World SF Con. $110 to 7/15/92.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. 1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598. (510) 945-1993.** SF WorldCon

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-3427 (fax).** WorldCon. Join at $C85/$US75.

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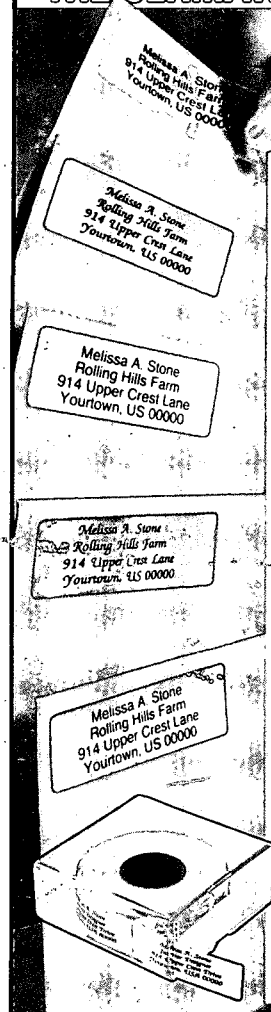

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